

Natural Selections

A NEWSLETTER OF THE ROCKEFELLER UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

Culture Corner

An Interview with *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin* author, Michael W. Clune, Ph.D.

BERNIE LANGS

I did not know what to expect when I procured a copy of Michael W. Clune's memoir, *White Out: The Secret Life of Heroin*, after reading a blog review about the book in the *New Yorker*. I very quickly became engrossed in *White Out*, consumed by its tale of the author's life of addiction. The book presents a cast of colorful characters appearing throughout and the exciting tale of Dr. Clune's highs and lows: his deceits, his run-ins with the law, and finally, his recovery. I found great humor throughout the memoir, and became attached to the author's ability to weave complex sentences that delight the reader in a strange and unique fashion. I found Dr. Clune online in the Department of English at Case Western Reserve University, where he is an Associate Professor specializing in American literature, literature and science, and poetry. I also came across several academic papers by Dr. Clune. Here are his enthusiastic responses to my questions.

Bernie Langs: Having read some of the essays you've produced as an academic, after reading *White Out*, I was struck by how different the "voice" is between the memoir and the professional writing. In fact, there are no traces, in my opinion, that the author of *White Out* could write in such a detailed, let us say, complex academic way. Did you make a conscious effort to distinguish the tone of *White Out* from what you produce in the humanities?

Michael Clune: My academic writing is quite different in tone and syntax from my creative writing. I would say that in the former, I strive for clarity. I want to communicate my ideas and my findings

as clearly as possible. Clarity is not always the same as accessibility. Clarity sometimes involves carefully distinguishing my views from various arguments made by others. I always try to avoid jargon, but sometimes the work requires the judicious use of terms of art. I begin to write my academic books and essays after a

long process of research and thought. The writing involves communicating what I've discovered as cleanly and economically as possible. In my creative work, the situation is different. Here, the writing itself is the discovery process. Since my preferred mode of writing is memoir, I don't need to work out the plot in advance. I simply sit down to write, and try to understand my memory and experience through the process of creating images and phrases that seem to fit. The language has to be very flexible; I have to work with a greater range of tone and meaning. In particular, humor is a crucial resource for my creative work. I'm constantly asking myself—how do I

IN MY CREATIVE WORK, HUMOR FUNCTIONS FOR ME AS A KIND OF STRANGE ANALOGUE TO THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD.



make this funny? What angle reveals the humor in this situation? Humor for me is a path to objectivity. When I can laugh at a memory or an experience, I become distanced from it. Laughter enables me to see myself from the outside, and grants me a different level of understanding. In my creative work, humor functions for me as a kind of strange analogue to the scientific method.

BL: I loved some of the sentence structure in *White Out*. Some phrasing had a unique, abstract quality that I found myself looking forward to and anticipating. Did you strive for that oddly convoluted style, or did it just come naturally to you? Is it supposed to represent on some level, a reflection, of the high of heroin?

MC: I like your use of the word "abstract" to describe some of the phrasing in that book. I think that's the right term. I'm trying to create an abstraction of a particular experience or sensation; I'm trying to

I'M TRYING TO CREATE AN ABSTRACTION OF A PARTICULAR EXPERIENCE OR SENSATION; I'M TRYING TO FASHION A CATEGORY INTO WHICH THE EXPERIENCE WILL FIT NEATLY.

fashion a category into which the experience will fit neatly.

For example, I use the following phrase to describe lying on a roof in NYC the first time I took heroin and looking up at a white cloud in the sky: "My eye was a glass box, and inside it there was no time. I kept the cloud inside it. I wish I could show it to you." I want to move these experiences from inside my memory, and put them on the page, where others can find them. The poet and critic Aaron Kunin says that literary form is a device for moving materials from one place and time to another. In my writing, I need a vehicle for moving certain experience from inside to out. Literary abstraction is like a little mobile container that allows an essentially wordless experience to appear here in the world where we speak, read, and listen.

BL: Some of your academic writing, such as "The Quest for Permanent Novelty" in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* actually notes the needs of drug addicts, and reflects the idea of the repeated, never-aging first experience with a drug that is a theme in *White Out*. What can you say about the parallels of the theme of the new in relation to your addiction and your often choosing it as a subject for your work in academia?

MC: There's a pretty direct relation, actually. Writing *White Out* was a discovery process for understanding addiction. I believe that novelty—the unfading novelty of the drug cue for the addict—plays a special role in addiction. I think I was able to see this so clearly because I'm a writer and scholar of literature, and therefore obsessed with images, and in particular with the problem of making images that stay fresh. The drug cue—a cigarette, a syringe—is the perfect artistic image in this regard. So after writing *White Out*, I began researching the ideas it had given me. I wanted to know if I could find a connection between addiction, novelty, and art in other writers. And then I wanted to understand how philosophers, writers,

and composers had wrestled with the impossible dream of creating an artistic image that never gets old. The fact that *White Out* actually came out a few months after *Writing Against Time*—and years after elements of the latter project appeared in scientific and literary journals—might obscure the relation between the two books. But I took what I'd learned from writing *White Out* into my study of the texts I explore in *Writing Against Time*.

BL: I especially enjoyed your articles "Bernhard's Way," about one of my favorite writers, Thomas Bernhard, and "Orwell and the Obvious," which focused on George Orwell and *1984*. I have personally written about the ending of Bernhard's book, *Woodcutters*, where the protagonist has to run home to put down in writing what he's just experienced. You cite this ending in your essay and I was wondering if you yourself have had such moments of inspiration with your work?

MC: That's such a great moment at the end of *Woodcutters*. I'm sorry to report no similarly dramatic "I must write now!" moments in my own life. Well, that's not quite true. At one point I used to feel the impulse to write immediately fairly frequently, and to indulge it almost as often. But the writing such moments produced generally wasn't very good. These days, I'll pick a certain block of time to write, and then just do it, regardless of whether I feel inspired or not. Inspiration generally follows within 15 to 20 minutes of starting to write, in my experience. My process is the result of applying a central principle in recovery from addiction to my life as a writer. You don't wait until you feel like doing something; you do it, and the feeling follows the action. Not very romantic, perhaps, but it's been working for me.

BL: I found your review in *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, "Pop Disappears," to be a very stimulating, yet, on a personal level, frightening read. I found myself thinking that you reflect a new school of intellectual

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Natural Selections

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that can write cerebrally on a book that features, of all things, a zombie. As a child of the 1960s I felt a little left behind, like my father's generation must have felt when certain intellectuals could find poetry in The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby." Do you feel as if you are part of a new movement in the humanities?

MC: It's funny, there's definitely a kind of movement of intellectuals trying to say smart things about pop cultural crap. Call it "cultural studies." I've always hated that kind of thing. And yet, I have written about two kinds of pop culture: rap music and computer games. I don't value these particular artifacts any differently than high art. I just think that the best examples of those particular forms are just as good as some of the novels, poems, and plays I admire, even if they operate quite differently. The vast majority of pop culture seems to me to be dreary and soul-crushing, and I have a lot of sympathy for Adorno's general take on what he called "the culture industry" half a century ago. My essay "Pop Disappears" is about experimental writers who work with pop cultural images. Bennett Sims' wonderful zombie novel, *A Questionable Shape*, is at least as influenced by Proust as it is by George Romero. Furthermore, the way writers like Sims are dealing with pop culture is subtly subversive. Sims and the poet Dana Ward draw zombies or pop songs out of their public, familiar worlds, and turn them into avatars of a new sensibility. And this sensibility presents itself as antagonistic to the consumerist ethos of our popular culture. I think of these writers as the opposite of Andy Warhol.

BL: Your 2013 book, *Writing Against Time*, is, according to your Case Western

page, about “the effort to create an image immune to the erosive effects of neurobiological time.” Can you sum up the gist of this idea? Are you working with any neurobiological labs?

MC: The first time we see an image, it’s intense, fresh. We expend a lot of cognitive energy when we encounter an unfamiliar thing, and we can feel this energy in the unusual vivacity of an image seen for the first time. Once we’ve seen it a number of times, however, that intensity will typically fade. It becomes hard to really see it. We say, “stop and smell the flowers,” but when we’ve walked past the same flowers many

times, it becomes really hard to notice them. Critics from Walter Pater to Viktor Shklovsky have understood the goal of art to be to make things new. Artists and writers want to present a familiar thing—a love affair, the sky, a city—in an unfamiliar way, so that we notice it again, so that it shines with something of the energy and intensity of the first time. I’m interested in the really hard problem—tackled by certain writers from Keats to Proust—to create an image that never gets old. These writers, in their search for a habit-resistant image, illuminate the capacities of the brain such an image might engage.

I worked with several neuroscientists and cognitive scientists to see what science might learn from art in this respect. Some of the findings came out in neuroscience and humanities journals, and I lay out the full argument in *Writing Against Time*. No one has yet created a time-resistant image. But they’re still trying, and we can learn surprising things from their efforts. A few days ago I got an email from the New York composer Christopher Trappani, who read *Writing Against Time* and is working on a piece of music employing some of the strategies I lay out. I’m excited to hear what he comes up with. ◎

New Science Journal to Publish Exclusively Through Twitter

JOHN BORGHI

Building on several recent developments in academic publishing and social media, a new publication platform for the distribution of scholarly material was announced this Wednesday by The Society for Concise Science. The new online platform, named after the chemical name of the protein, titin (which is 189,819 letters long and, thus, cannot be printed here), will publish a journal, tentatively titled *Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg*.

In his introductory press release, *Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg*’s loquacious editor-in-chief, Dr. A. Ey, described the origins of the new journal “Observing the slow move

from traditional publishing metrics such as impact factor to alternatives based on online discussion, it became obvious to us that we could optimize scientific communication by publishing directly to social media.” Several dozen pages later he went on to state that, “Since they will not be constrained by the artificial limitations imposed by ‘luxury’ journals such as *Nature* or *Science*, researchers will be able to thoroughly describe the theoretical basis, methods, results, and conclusions of their research projects in 140 characters.”

When preparing submissions for the new journal, scientists will apparently be asked to include both a hashtag with the name of the journal and lengthy digital

object identifier. While information about multi-author submissions, the peer review process, and the integration of tables and figures into journal submissions is still forthcoming, reaction from the scientific community has already been quite mixed. Comments on the science-based Tumblr BoldSignals have ranged from “This looks amazing!” to “This is completely ridiculous.” ◎

Other Headlines:

-Residents of Webster, MA Vote to Officially Rename Lake *Chargoggagoggmanchauggagoggchaubunagungamaugg*

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NEEDS YOU!

The Oldest Irish Bar in the City

AILEEN MARSHALL

Most New Yorkers have heard of, if not been to, McSorley's, a downtown bar. Popular belief is that it's the oldest bar in the city; it even has sawdust on the floor. Many historical figures have patronized it over the years. It's also famous for being one of the last to allow women. It had a unisex bathroom until recent years.

Officially, the name is McSorley's Old Ale House, at 15 East 7th Street in the East Village. According to the bar's website, it was established in 1854 by John McSorley, a recent Irish immigrant. The original name was "The Old House at Home." In 1865 the building was upgraded and John and his family moved in upstairs above the bar. According to city records, the address was a vacant lot until 1861. A writer for *New York Magazine* did some historical research and found it opened in 1862. The title of oldest continuously running bar in the city had been Bridge Café on Water Street, established in 1794. However, McSorley's can claim to be the oldest Irish bar in New York City.

In 1888, John McSorley bought the building. John's son, William took over the bar in 1911. William sold the bar to Daniel O'Connor (in 1936), a longtime patron and retired police officer. O'Connor's daughter, Dorothy Kirwan, inherited the bar when her father died in 1939. Since the pub did not allow women, she made her husband manager and only came on Sunday nights after it was closed. Dorothy's son, Danny, took ownership of the bar in 1975. He then sold the bar to Mathew Maher, an Irish immigrant and friend of this father's, in 1977. Maher still owns McSorley's today.

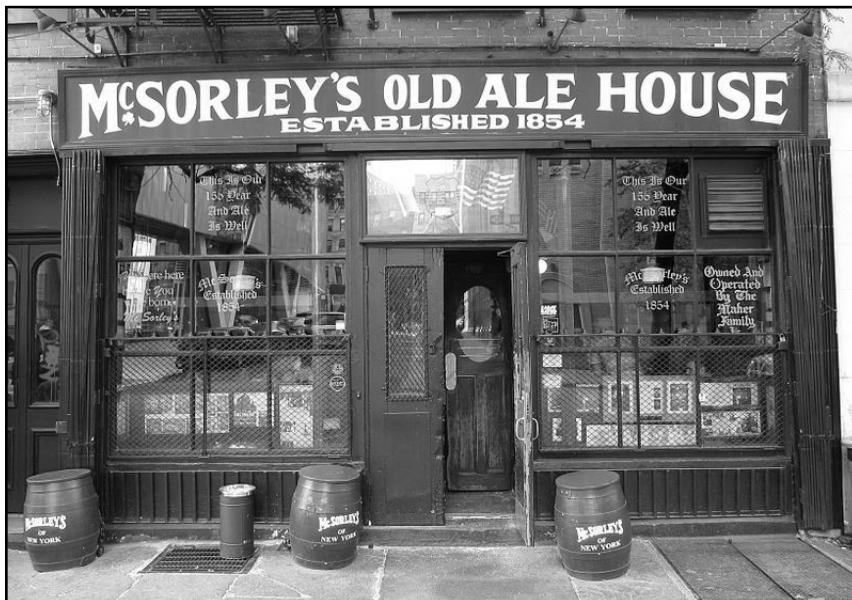
In 1905 McSorley's tried serving hard liquor along with beer, but stopped a year later, and the bar has only sold beer and ale ever since. During Prohibition, they sold "near beer" but ale was sold in the back room. In the early 1900s, the artist John Sloan was a regular who did a series of paintings of McSorley's, some of which are hanging in the bar today. In 1940, *The New Yorker* published an article about the bar, which was a big boon to business. The author published a book, *McSorley's Wonderful Saloon*, three years later. That same year, *Life Magazine* did a photographic fea-

ture. After being sued by two National Organization for Women lawyers, a landmark Supreme Court order forced McSorley's to allow women in 1970. The management considered becoming a private club, but then gave into public pressure and ended their discrimination policy. At that time many predicted McSorley's end. Since there was only one bathroom, it was designated "unisex." A ladies' room was built in 1986.

Many historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Ulysses S. Grant, Teddy Roosevelt, Peter Cooper, Boss Tweed, and Woody Guthrie are reported to have sat on the stools. Literary figures like Hunter S. Thompson, Brendan Behan, and E. E. Cummings are known for knocking down a pint. E. E. Cummings wrote a poem, "i was sitting in mcsorley's" in 1925, in which he describes the bar as "snug and evil." When the New York Rangers hockey team won the Stanley Cup in 1994, they took the cup to McSorley's and drank out of it.

The bar has many interesting and historic decorations and artifacts. A portrait of Peter Cooper hangs over the fireplace. During World War I, the "doughboys" going off to war would leave a wishbone hanging over the bar, and would take them down when they came home. The dusty wishbones hanging there today are from those who didn't make it back. The original taps are still in McSorley's, although they no longer work. But the coal-burning stove does. A wanted poster for John Wilkes Booth hangs in the bar, as well as the Yankees' official farewell photograph of Babe Ruth. J. Giles gave a gold record of "Love Stinks" as well as the sheet music to McSorley's. There is a signed copy of Frank McCourt's "Angela's Ashes" donated by the author after he did an interview with Tom Brokaw in the bar.

One of McSorley's known mottos, "Be Good or Be Gone," is inscribed over the fireplace. There is a sign on the wall that says "We Trust Here" over a picture of a pig's posterior. "Good Ale, Raw Onions and No Ladies" was the saying until 1970. Raw onions are still part of the cheese platter. This stronghold of Old New York even still serves a liverwurst sandwich. ◎





New York State of Mind

This Month Natural Selections interviews Matthew Meselson, Visiting Professor from Harvard University.
By May Dobosiewicz

From: California
Been here: Two months
Staying in: The Upper East Side

What brought you to NYC?

We thought it would be warmer with not as much snow and rain as Boston, but we've had one really unusual winter here!

Do you come often?

Yes, pretty often. We have a son and daughter down here, and now we are introducing two of our grandchildren to New York. My wife grew up in New York. There's something about the air here, she feels like she's at home.

Do you remember the first time you came to New York?

Yes, it was 1949. I used to make rare earth chemicals and sell them to the AD Mackay Company on 198 Broadway when I was a kid in Los Angeles, California. I came to New York and wanted to visit the company, imagining it would be some fabulous place with all kinds of chemists, but instead it was just a little office and a room with shelves and shelves of dusty bottles. I was selling praseodymium oxide and samarium oxide—really pure stuff—for 60 cents a gram, and they were charging about ten dollars for it. A huge markup! The old couple that owned the company took me out for lunch, told me they were going to retire, and that if I wanted the company, I could have it for free. I was only 19 years old, and I thought, do I really want to spend my life doing that? I said "No" and got on a ship to La Havre, France.

What do you think of New Yorkers?

In experimenting on New York, I decided to smile at people in the tunnel of Rockefeller, where you cross paths with all kinds of people, and I compared this to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Los Angeles. In LA, people are already smiling anyway. In the RU tunnel, people are not, but if you smile at them, they smile right back.



In Cambridge, if you smile at them, they look frightened. I think it's really significant—the n value is at least 100.

Do you like the New York restaurant scene?

Elsewhere, waiters do certain terrible things, like saying, "Are you still working on that?" I don't work on my food; I enjoy it and eat it. Or "There you go," as they serve something—I'm not going anywhere! But in New York, the waiters seem just right; they don't intrude, more professional. If you want intrusive waiters, you want ones who are good at it. Go to Sammy's Roumanian Steakhouse, where they take a delight in abusing you. That's a place you remember going to.

How do you feel about New York politics?

That's an exciting thing about New York. Bloomberg was pretty good at improving things for the upper middle class and making New York attractive to investors and companies. Without that, the city

would die. On the other hand, there are a lot of people here who are not into hedge funds; it sounds like the right sequence of events that you should now have de Blasio. He understands that early education is really important. The whole country, maybe the whole world, will be watching New York to see how it works. If it can't be done in New York,

then it can't be done anywhere except maybe little towns, and that would be very bad news for the country. I wish him luck.

Do you feel that New York has a huge class divide?

Huge, even though some like to think there isn't. In New York, having money seems more important than in other places. It's expensive to live here, and that may influence the ambiance. It's harder to live like a bohemian here, I'd imagine.

If you could change one thing about New York, what would it be?

I would create here a lovely apartment for me.

Would you spend the rest of your life here?

No. From December to March, we escape Cambridge to the Bahamas and Los Angeles, with Christmas in Paris, France. If you'd give me a nice place in New York, I'd put New York right in there though. ☺

Brooklyn Night Bazaar

JASON ROTHAUER

For both the hip and hungry, Brooklyn has been host to a growing new trend over the past few years: the food festival. The idea is simple: take the fun and novelty of a music festival or a craft fair, mix it with the kind of gourmet delights that foodies hunt the city for, and stir vigorously.

You may already be familiar with the Great Googamooga (a seasonal food and music festival in Prospect Park) or Smorgasburg (an indoor/outdoor “flea food market” in Williamsburg). Both invite restaurants and vendors from all over Brooklyn to set up individual booths and allow visitors to sample some of the borough’s brightest culinary hot spots in one shot. The newest is Greenpoint’s Brooklyn Night Bazaar, and it’s easily worth a visit.

Unlike the Great Googamooga and some similar offerings, the Night Bazaar is open year-round in a permanent indoor space, but only open from 6 p.m. to midnight, Fridays and Saturdays. Entrance is free, with no cover for the musical acts. If

you’re a local, it’s a great place to wander around and show to a few friends. If you don’t usually find yourself walking the quiet streets of Greenpoint, it’s a solid weekend destination that pairs perfectly with the nearby bars and restaurants on Franklin Street.

On a recent trip, I sampled four or five dishes from a range of venues. My first choice, a fried rice ball from Arancini Bros., lived up to the hype. The ragu ball boasted a perfectly crisp exterior yielding to a rich, tender filling. The dish reminded me of the addictive ragout croquettes popular in the Netherlands. Lobster sliders from the nearby Lobster Joint did not disappoint either, and survived the trip down Manhattan Avenue without losing any of their appeal (which comes in the form of a generous portion of claw meat and a perfectly toasted Martin’s potato roll). The highlight though was the delicately spicy steamed pork bun I tried at another vendor (who I am unfortunately unable to credit by name, as the vari-

ous vendors rotate, and I neglected to write this one down). There’s also a bar, offering a decent selection of beer and wine, with an emphasis on New York breweries.

Sharing space with the food is a larger-still selection of vendors selling handcrafted items, knick-knacks, t-shirts, art prints, and the like. A stage for performances is situated at the rear of the hall, and live acts play from about 9 o’clock onward. (Expect some hit and miss.) There is also mini-golf. In short, the vibe is decidedly eclectic.

Food was my focus on my previous visit, but it’s the kind of place that’s fun because you never know what you might find. On my last visit, I was about to leave, assuming I’d seen everything, when something caught my eye: an art library, complete with free membership cards. I turned around and headed back. ◎

Brooklyn Night Bazaar
165 Bunker Street, Brooklyn
bkbazaar.com

Ten Years of Natural Selections

DANIEL BRISKIN

The first issue of Natural Selections was published in February of 2004. In these past ten years, much has happened, on-campus and off. For all that has happened, however, much has stayed the same, including the humor. This year we are republishing the best and most timeless pieces from the corresponding month in 2004. ◎

Continuing on with our salute to the tenth anniversary of Natural Selections, here is this month’s republished comic from 2004. ◎

Lost in Translation...

By Muriel Lainé

I did not steal your pipetman.
Non, je n’ai pas volé vos pipettes.

Excuse me, where is the water bottle?

Pardon, pouvez vous me dire où est le bistrot le plus proche?

I am going to a seminar on apoptosis. Are you interested?
Je vais au ciné voir un film, tu viens?

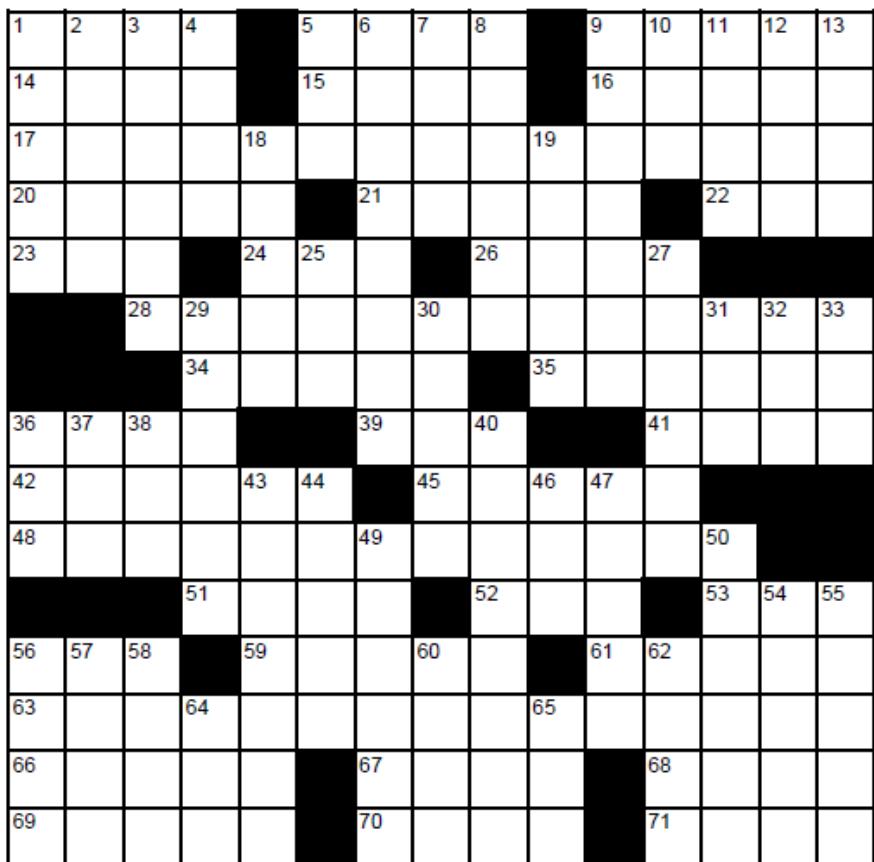
It's easy, you take the template, the primer etc... and start the reaction.
Facile, tu dis au technicien ce qu'il faut faire et tu vas au ciné.

Requiescat in Pace

GEORGE BARANY

George Barany is a Rockefeller alum (1977).

For more puzzles by Barany and Friends and for the solution to this month's puzzle, visit <http://tinyurl.com/gbpuzzle>



© July 2012

Across

1. "M*A*S*H" star
5. Bite
9. Red cabbage?
14. Un número perfecto
15. It's a thought
16. Mountain nymph
17. Galápagos locale where Lonesome George was the last of his line
20. Chinese or Thai, e.g.
21. Hurricane in August 2011
22. Cryptanalyst's need
23. Strong desire
24. Mad Hatter's party
26. Necklace unit, perhaps
28. Lonesome George, e.g.
34. Up and about
35. Brat
36. "Bye" lines?
39. Opposite of trans
41. Sicilian volcano

42. Make thinner, like mountain air
45. First-string squad
48. ___ Research Station, where Lonesome George was situated
51. Window frame
52. Stranded messenger?
53. Punching tool
56. On one's ___
59. Sound of contempt
61. Betting odds, e.g.
63. Antithesis of 48-Across' most famous title, or what Lonesome George's fate represents
66. Follow after
67. Malarial fever
68. Place for an ace
69. Place for a witness
70. Undivided
71. These come to all, including Lonesome George and his line

Down

1. Test one's metal?
2. Car dealer's offering
3. Type of car or hall
4. Co-star in "The Awful Truth" and "Bringing Up Baby"
5. ___-tac-toe
6. Setting for the shipwreck in "Twelfth Night"
7. Prefix with algia or itis
8. Garden shelter
9. Promising
10. Net destination
11. Bird's-eye view?
12. Channel
13. Whirlpool
18. Chips in?
19. Like helium, neon, or argon, but not necessarily xenon
25. Absorb, as a cost
27. Song from "The Sound of Music"
29. Talent show judges
30. Any Tom, Dick, and Harry
31. One way to get to Carnegie Hall
32. Ham, to Noah
33. Old NOW cause
36. Tolkien creature
37. "Pshaw!"
38. George's lyricist
40. Turns on, as an engine
43. Burned brightly but briefly
44. Like some questions
46. Suffix with east- or west-
47. On the ball
49. Ram's horn used on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur
50. Stephen Colbert's term of address for his viewers
54. Handle
55. Gets licked
56. Horace volume
57. Hit the road
58. Org. that reaches for the stars?
60. Music whose name is Sanskrit for "color"
62. Suffer
64. Wine holder
65. Lab at home?

Life on a Roll



Passage d'enfer



Promenade



Shopping mall

All photos contributed by Elodie Pauwels,
<http://elodiepphoto.wordpress.com>



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