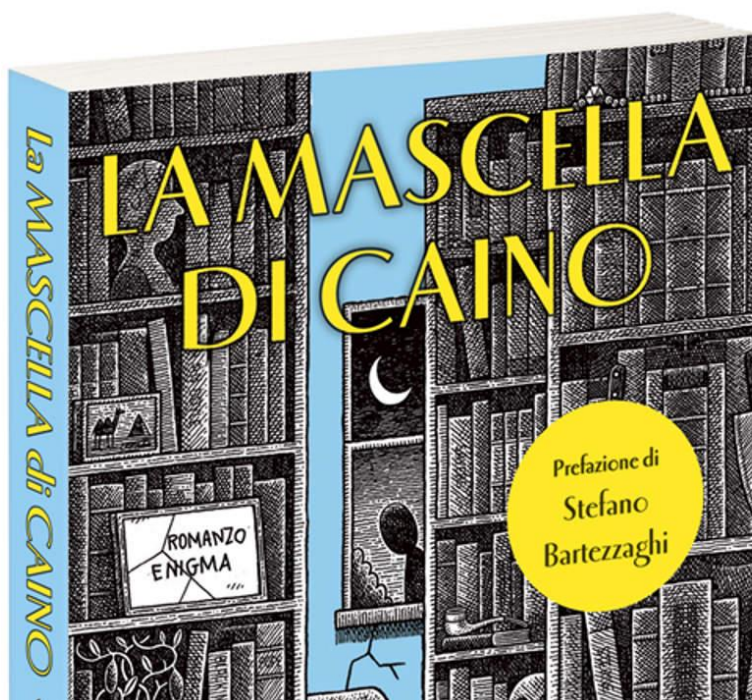# A Novel Murder Mystery: Cain's Jawbone [C1]

Solo tre persone sono state capaci di risolvere questo contorto enigma letterario. Oggigiorno, grazie a un'associazione britannica e a una sorprendente popolarità sui social media, l'enigma è in cerca di qualcuno che lo risolva.

Cain's **Jawbone** — A Novel Problem is a murder mystery book published in 1934 as part of The Torquemada Puzzle Book. The challenge was to understand the hundred pages, reorder them correctly, and find out who committed six murders. But, full of wordplay and obscure literary references, it is so very **devious** that only a **handful** of people have managed to solve it. The name of the book is a **nod** to the first known murder weapon, the jawbone of an **ass**, which Cain is said to have used to kill his brother Abel. The jawbone is not actually mentioned in the Bible, but in a 7th-century commentary on it.

CROSSWORD PIONEER

The literary puzzle is the creation of Ernest Powys Mathers, an English translator, poet and pioneer in compiling cryptic crosswords. In 1923, he

received **praise** for making a translation of the complex book of Arabic **folk tales** One Thousand and One Night into English, **albeit** from a French version. He was subsequently inspired to sit cross-legged, oriental style, to create his crosswords, which were published in The Observer newspaper under the pseudonym Torquemada. The name is **borrowed** from the 15th-century torturer Tomás de Torquemada of the Spanish Inquisition.

CRIMINALLY COMPLEX

On its publication, a competition was launched by The Observer offering a cash prize for anyone who could solve Cain's **Jawbone**. Only two men got it right: W. S. Kennedy and S. A. Sydney-Turner, the **latter** belonging to a band of literary Londoners known as the Bloomsbury Group. However in 1939 Mathers died, World War Two began, and the solution was lost.

UNEXPECTED REVIVAL

Some eighty-five years later, Patrick Wildgust, curator at the Laurence Stern **Trust** in the northern English county of Yorkshire, was given a copy of The Torquemada Puzzle Book. After attempting the crosswords, he became fascinated by the crime story puzzle at the back. **Thus** began a lengthy and collaborative process of investigation, crowdfunding, re-publishing and unexpected viral marketing that has resulted in Mathers' **nerdish** text becoming a big hit on TikTok! To find out more, Speak Up contacted Wildgust. We began by asking him about Mathers and his puzzles. **Patrick Wildgust (English accent):** Ideally you should be able to do a crossword and learn something as you do it. Mathers used a lot of **quotations**, and the idea, he said, was to lead you through a literary landscape as well as a puzzle landscape. So, you would find out about things that you didn't necessarily know, you'd learn new words. These references to authors and **quotations** from those authors, they were the food and drink of people who converse. **Once upon a time**, your library was your head and what it contained, and Mathers had a phenomenal memory. Apparently, he would read a book once and that's it, it was in there.

EXTENSIVE RESEARCH

The solution to Cain's **Jawbone** was never printed in the 1930s, although The Observer did offer to send it by post to those who requested it. With the use of the internet, Wildgust thought he had **a fighting chance** of solving it himself. He was wrong. **Patrick Wildgust:** I didn't solve it, I found the solution. I got other people involved and we talked about it and we tried to see whether we could do it or how we could do it. And then I started to research to try to find out whether I could find the answer. Somewhere in desks of **great-grandparents** there possibly will be copies of the answer sent by The Observer. I've not come across any of those. I **ass**umed that there would be a library somewhere with the answer written in; that Gollancz, the publishers, would have the answer, but it didn't have any reference anywhere. It took a long time, this.

CROWDFUNDING

Eventually, Wildgust did find the solution. He then **teamed up** with John Mitchinson, founder of the crowdfunding publisher Unbound, to produce an attractive, easy-to-use edition in the form of an illustrated box with one hundred individual cards. **Patrick Wildgust:** The main problem was the fact they [the pages of the original] were printed on both sides. So, the suggestion that I made was they can be read in any order, but you can then put them next to each other and experiment. Unbound did a very good job: in a box and very nicely done, **a nice-sized print** so you could play around with it, and also with Tom Gauld... with his illustration on the outside.

SOLVED AGAIN

In Mathers' honour a new competition was launched, challenging modern readers to find the solution. Prominent British comedy writer John Finnemore dedicated lockdown to doing just that, producing the right solution in November 2020. **Patrick Wildgust:** John Finnemore, fortunately, had exactly the right mind and also was able, thanks to the lockdown, to be able to work on this book. You need to have a brain which plays around with

ideas and **ass**ociations, and also can **spot** similar ways of thinking and also things that indicate what may be **current** or relevant or pertinent. It's not easy!

TIKTOK FAME

But that was not the end of it. **A year on**, young booktoker Sarah Scannell found a **paperback** edition of Cain's **Jawbone** in an independent San Francisco bookstore. Her TikTok post, in which she says, "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**," was viewed over four million times, and received more than five thousand comments. Cain's **Jawbone** temporarily **sold out** everywhere, to Wildgust's **astonishment** and **delight**. **Patrick Wildgust:** It was absolutely extraordinary. It **blows a hole** through everybody's advertising campaigns in terms of what is going to be successful. People love crime fiction, and they love the idea of something which needs solving. Crime walls are something which are **part and parcel** of the **fabric** of contemporary visual detective stories. People all stand around pointing at things that connect with various other things, and she liked the idea and had her own crime wall and [to] see if she could solve it that way.

MORE FUN

While Scannell has not yet solved the puzzle, there is still the challenge of keeping the solution a secret in an age when there are no secrets, says Wildgust. **Patrick Wildgust:** You have **to rely** on people wanting to continue playing the game. There aren't any rules with this, but if you would like **to make up** the rules of not telling anybody, everybody can have more fun. Cain's **Jawbone** is published in Spanish as El enigma de Caín (Penguin Libros)

A TEAM OF TRANSLATORS

The success of Cain's **Jawbone** led to immediate requests for the book in translation. While any translation presents obstacles, this is particularly true

of Torquemada's **twisted** text, full of word play, obscure references and black humour. However, as Patrick Wildgust points out, "limitations often produce the strongest intellectual ideas" and this was certainly the case with this **Europe-wide** cooperative effort between a whole team of translators, editors and publishers. To honour both the author and the collaborative approach, the translators decided to publish under pseudonyms. Among them, The Crime **Badger**o") (translator into Italian) and Simón de Samotracia (**aka** Victoria Simó, translator into Spanish). Translators met daily to discuss the book with the input of John Finnemore, one of the very few in history to solve the puzzle. As the text is full of literary references, knowledge of the cl **ass**ics prominent in the early 20th century was important, says Simó, as was investigation into more obscure references. "While it was important as a translator to be aware of the solution and the process by which it was reached, like being a detective, you also had to trust your own instincts, noticing **patterns** in the text which may reorder their immediate context, producing a revelatory mental image...". While it may seem erudite, the book is designed to entertain and you don't need to be a mastermind to enjoy it, says Simó: "One of the **joys** of Torquemada is the cultural diversity of his references, he clearly wanted to encourage his readers to discover c**lass**ical texts for themselves".

Glossary

- **Once upon a time** = c'era una volta (anticamente)
- **board** = lavagna
- **sold out** = esaurirsi
- **delight** = soddisfazione
- **patterns** = schemi
- **nod** = allusione
- **praise** = lode
- **albeit** = benché, anche se
- **Thus** = così
- **great-grandparents** = bisnonni
- **folk tales** = favole, leggende
- **current** = attuali
- **Europe-wide** = in tutta Europa
- **Badger** = tasso
- **to make up** = inventare
- **joys** = gioie
- **devious** = contorto
- **ass** = asino
- **nerdish** = un po' da secchioni
- **teamed up** = fare squadra
- **A year on** = un anno dopo
- **paperback** = copertina morbida, tascabile
- **Jawbone** = mascella
- **quotations** = citazioni
- **handful** = manciata
- **latter** = quest'ultimo
- **spot** = identificare
- **fabric** = tessuto
- **twisted** = contorto
- **a fighting chance** = qualche possibilità
- **blows a hole** = mettere in discussione
- **aka** = alias (also known as)
- **borrowed** = prendere in prestito

- **Trust** = fondazione
- **a nice-sized print** = versione con caratteri di buone dimensioni
- **astonishment** = stupore
- **part and parcel** = parte integrante
- **to rely** = contare su, fare affidamento