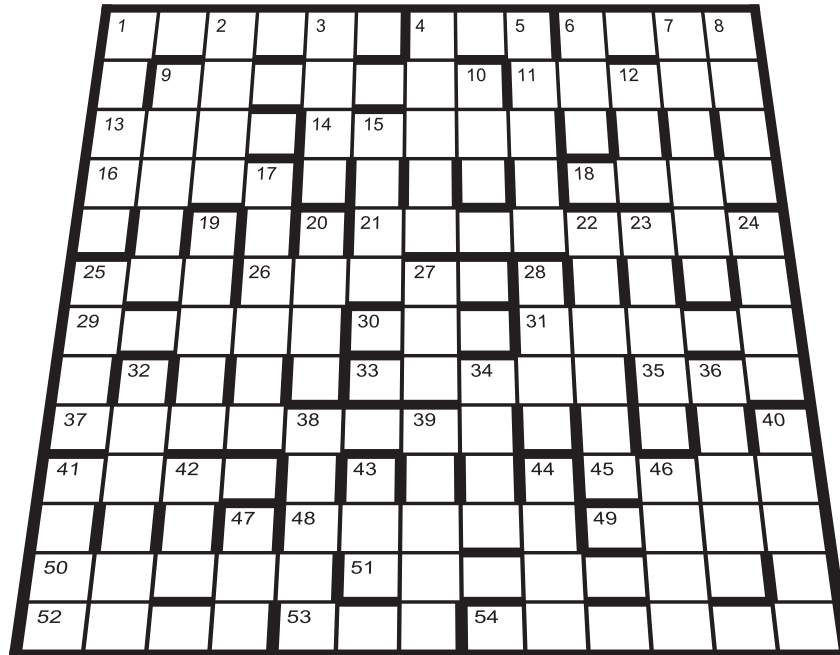


A long time ago...

by 530nm330Hz



Decades have passed and almost no one believes in the Force. It can't be seen, after all, although its effects can be perceived by those who know what to look for.

(A) Certain entries in this puzzle reflect that ongoing duality: One of their squares is "in play" between two equally matched entities. In the clues for these entries, the wordplay omits the contended square, and only one definition is present. The other definition is hiding in the clue for another entry; the *refuge* is an entry that intersects the *contested* entry in a *non-contested* square. (There are eight across and nine down contested entries, and thus nine across and eight down entries that provide refuge.)

(B) The champions of good and evil stand ready to duel over this conflict. This being a movie, they are in the center of the frame. Two entries represent their homewor(l)ds, which they have started to depart. Each knight is holding a weapon, ready to duel.

(C) The movie cuts to the action sequence. The remaining 8 across clues tell you the knights' positions as the duel progresses. The first and last letters of these clues have been altered. (Pray I do not alter them further.) The *first* letters indicate the position of the knight on the *left*, and the *last* letters indicate the position of the one on the *right*. In each case, if the correct letter is n letters *later* in the alphabet than the altered letter, the corresponding warrior is n spaces to the *right* of the column where you found their weapon; if it's *earlier*, the warrior is n spaces to the *left* of their weapon. (They never cross paths, and they always move in the same direction in a given row.)

Another way to think of it: if the letters A–Z had been written out as column headings, with the *altered* letter above the column where you found a knight's weapon; then that knight is in the column that would be headed by the *correct* letter.

These eight rows occur in two contiguous groups, in clue order from top to bottom, but their exact location is for you to determine. The letters in all the squares occupied by the sinister duelist, followed by all the ones occupied by the dextrous one, will spell out a phrase describing each of their weapons.

(D) Turn on your targeting computer: For every entry with a contested square in the n th square, take the n th letter of the clue. Scan the central column of the grid, from top to bottom, stopping when you first reach that letter. Now move left or right until you reach the column in which the clue's contested square falls. Circle that square (if you haven't already done so). The circled letters, read left to right, complete the description of each weapon.

(E) Finally, look at the 16 remaining down clues. If the alphabetically first letter of the answer is the n th letter of the answer, read off n th character of the clue, in clue order. Then, if the alphabetically last letter of the answer is the n th letter from the end of the answer, read off the n th character from the end of the clue, in clue order. (In both cases, if there's a tie, take the smaller n . If there's tagging at the end of the clue, ignore it when counting characters.) They will explain why I, in particular, felt compelled to write this puzzle.

ACROSS

- 1 A car's damaged in melee
- 4 Jan shot around undressed Starr
- 6 One Alabama city's half-moon goddess
- 9 Inside internal coating, germs start to persist unpleasantly
- 11 Whip *Lear I* in Shakespearean spirit
- 13 No ordinary Thursdays, Easters' introductions exhibit distinction
- 14 After an upset, stylist Sassoon neglecting two heads: of Vishnu and tennis champ
- 16 Same in high fashion: Christian's naked love embracing, ultimately, Sherm
- 18 Most archetypal yellow journalist Povich
- 21 Have upset, to a degree, "packing" primed-to-capture-someone cop
- 25 Follower of Chinese twentieth-century leader a Greek character
- 26 Kate's debut notwithstanding, blow horn to play "Taps"? OK
- 29 Assume part of C-3PO's itinerary
- 30 Fumbling Al Jazeera lead-ins are "mandatory Islamic trim" [*var.*]
- 31 Alters walk with purpose, dismissing R2-D2's entrance as "a moonwalk"
- 33 Peel a pair next to young lady avoiding OD
- 35 Immediately near to millennia-old love
- 37 Handle, relating to ancient civilization, depicts a person who pays for warez
- 41 Animal House org. is one guilty of betrayal
- 45 Rip off a hit Asian cuisine
- 48 Landon's half-embedded with "BC" cartoon voice artist
- 49 Someone paid, as the saying goes, with stolen money and gold in postal envelope
- 50 Small-scale error, or trans chemical compound that's typically explosive
- 51 Where Helsinki is north, in place of Ikea's introduction for, like, parquet
- 52 Loose Magdalene a sybarite at heart
- 53 Tendering \$10-\$1,050 in letters with a file format used to organize the different parts of a document and structure its date [*abbr.*]
- 54 Boringly drone on from subject to subject, subject to...

DOWN

- 1 Around yonder concealed bay
- 2 Musical-sound maker that's shaken a lot
- 3 Middling nanny -- a protagonist in Rodgers & Hammerstein show
- 4 Turn down place to sleep with troublemaking one throwing out instruction to be quiet
- 5 By any logical standard, airworthiness starts with lightweight wood used in gliders
- 6 Identity marker of value in India and Serbia, oddly
- 7 Wrath's culmination right in the middle of rewind recording tape for singer of "Silent E"
- 8 Asian people produce eggs
- 9 ___ is to "another way" as "fob off anything *that* undesirable" is to "another person"
- 10 Albion's flying fighters turned around conflict with missing wingtip [*abbr.*]
- 12 Loquaciously extract promise to settle debts, private or public [*abbr.*]
- 15 Overthrown Gail for Sacha Baron Cohen's character who conducts interviews [*2 wds.*]
- 17 Encircling (that is, with caresses) red corundums
- 19 Sailor of myth five mos. of the year
- 20 Lacking runs, high-scoring no-hitters in thirds of an inning at Fenway
- 22 Rapunzel's hair clung to by Mark, from Spain, climbing and illuminated with a rosy tint [*hyph.*]
- 23 Stern of boat by Venetian district refusing to experiment
- 24 Olden-days act found in Colorado's Toledo
- 25 Full-length saga is excellent choice by audience
- 27 Signed bill determines first of words to complete 'L.A. ___'
- 28 Curbside expanse uplifting start of White's address
- 32 Disturbed pair to play role that's famous
- 34 Element that Corsair onslaught revealed
- 36 93 million miles separating one side of road from the other with Rove seeking plunder
- 38 Open on video with Caesar's wife hosting (please pay attention!) premiere of opera
- 39 Central isle, from a secondary vantage point, provides modern commerce [*hyph.*]
- 40 American on April 15, often, with final details of schedule going in to Internal Revenue
- 41 Augusta's state in error
- 42 Not unsuitable for (e.g.) 2br w/ d/w
- 43 Always start with long ballad about the wife of "Gustav and Walter and Franz"
- 44 Contributor-supported legal gp. needs a hint, mostly [*abbr.*]
- 46 Offer of assistance with solo defense
- 47 Bread for deli sandwiches insufficient for what a line cook must do

Enumerations have been withheld. A few proper nouns are not in any Merriam-Webster dictionary. Thanks to Tortoise (tortoiseshellstudio.com) and TMcAy (tmcaylifeasapuzzle.wordpress.com) for test-solving! Answers at greenehouse.com/a
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