



Death by Scrabble

Charlie Fish



It's a hot day and I hate my **wife**.

We're playing **Scrabble**. That's how bad it is. I'm 42 years old, it's a blistering hot Sunday afternoon and all I can think of to do with my life is to play Scrabble.

I should be out, doing exercise, spending money, meeting people. I don't think I've spoken to anyone except my wife since Thursday morning. On Thursday morning I spoke to the milkman.

5

My letters are crap.

I play, appropriately, **BEGIN**. With the N on the little pink star. Twenty-two points.

10

I watch my wife's smug expression as she rearranges her letters. Clack, clack, clack. I hate her. If she wasn't around, I'd be doing something interesting right now. I'd be climbing Mount **Kilimanjaro**. I'd be starring in the latest Hollywood blockbuster. I'd be sailing the Vendee Globe on a 60-foot clipper called the New Horizons - I don't know, but I'd be doing something.

15

She plays **JINXED**, with the J on a double-letter score. 30 points. She's beating me already. Maybe I should kill her.

If only I had a D, then I could play **MURDER**. That would be a sign. That would be permission.

20

I start chewing on my U. It's a bad habit, I know. All the letters are frayed. I play **WARMER** for 22 points, mainly so I can keep chewing on my U.

As I'm picking new letters from the bag, I find myself thinking - the letters will tell me what to do. If they spell out **KILL**, or STAB, or her name, or anything, I'll do it right now. I'll finish her off.

25

My rack spells **MIHZPA**. Plus the U in my mouth. Damn.

The heat of the sun is pushing at me through the window. I can hear buzzing insects outside. I hope they're not bees. My cousin **Harold** swallowed a **bee** when he was nine, his throat swelled up and he died. I hope that if they are bees, they fly into my wife's throat.

She plays **SWEATIER**, using all her letters. 24 points plus a 50-point bonus. If it wasn't too hot to move I would strangle her right now.

I am getting sweatier. It needs to rain, to clear the air. As soon as that thought crosses my mind, I find a good word. **HUMID** on a double-word score, using the D of **JINXED**. The U makes a little splash of saliva when I put it down. Another 22 points. I hope she has lousy letters.

She tells me she has lousy letters. For some reason, I hate her more.

She plays **FAN**, with the F on a double-letter, and gets up to fill the kettle and turn on the air conditioning. 30

It's the hottest day for ten years and my wife is turning on the kettle. This is why I hate my wife. I play **ZAPS**, with the Z doubled, and she gets a static shock off the air conditioning unit. I find this remarkably satisfying. 35

She sits back down with a heavy sigh and starts fiddling with her letters again. **Clack** clack. Clack clack. I feel a terrible rage build up inside me. Some inner poison slowly spreading through my limbs, and when it gets to my fingertips I am going to jump out of my chair, spilling the Scrabble tiles over the floor, and I am going to start hitting her again and again and again. 40

The rage gets to my fingertips and passes. My heart is beating. I'm sweating. I think my face actually twitches. Then I sigh, deeply, and sit back into my chair. The kettle starts whistling. As the whistle builds it makes me feel hotter. 45

She plays **READY** on a double-word for 18 points, then goes to pour herself a cup of tea. No I do not want one.

I steal a blank tile from the letter bag when she's not looking, and throw back a V from my rack. She gives me a suspicious look. She sits back down with her cup of tea, making a cup-ring on the table, as I play an 8-letter word: **CHEATING**, using the A of **READY**. 64 points, including the 50-point bonus, which means I'm beating her now. 50

She asks me if I cheated.
I really, really hate her.

She plays **IGNORE** on the triple-word for 21 points.
The score is 153 to her, 155 to me.

The steam rising from her cup of tea makes me feel hotter. I try to make murderous words with the letters on my rack, but the best I can do is **SLEEP**.

My wife sleeps all the time. She slept through an argument our next-door neighbours had that resulted in a broken door, a smashed TV and a **Teletubby Lala** doll with all the stuffing coming out. And then she [nagged] at me for being moody the next day from lack of sleep.

If only there was some way for me to get rid of her. 55

I spot a chance to use all my letters. **EXPLODES**, using the X of **JINXED**. 72 points. That'll show her.

As I put the last letter down, there is a deafening bang and the air conditioning unit fails.

60

My heart is racing, but not from the shock of the bang. I don't believe it - but it can't be a coincidence. The letters made it happen. I played the word **EXPLODES**, and it happened - the air conditioning unit exploded. And before, I played the word **CHEATING** when I cheated. And **ZAP** when my wife got the electric shock. The words are coming true. The letters are choosing their future. The whole game is - **JINXED**.

65

My wife plays **SIGN**, with the N on a triple-letter, for 10 points.

70

I have to test this.

I have to play something and see if it happens. Something unlikely, to prove that the letters are making it happen. My rack is **ABQYFWE**. That doesn't leave me with a lot of options. I start frantically chewing on the B.

75

I play **FLY**, using the L of **EXPLODES**. I sit back in my chair and close my eyes, waiting for the sensation of rising up from my chair. Waiting to fly.

Stupid. I open my eyes, and there's a fly. An insect, buzzing around above the Scrabble board, surfing the thermals from the tepid cup of tea. That proves nothing. The fly could have been there anyway.

80

I need to play something unambiguous. Something that cannot be misinterpreted. Something absolute and final. Something terminal. Something murderous.

85

My wife plays **CAUTION**, using a blank tile for the N. 18 points.

My rack is AQWEUK, plus the B in my mouth. I am awed by the power of the letters, and frustrated that I cannot wield it. Maybe I should cheat again, and pick out the letters I need to spell **SLASH** or SLAY.

Then it hits me. The perfect word. A powerful, dangerous, terrible word.

I play **QUAKE** for 19 points.

I wonder if the strength of the quake will be proportionate to how many points it scored. I can feel the trembling energy of potential in my veins. I am commanding fate. I am manipulating **destiny**.

My wife plays DEATH for 34 points, just as the room starts to shake.

I gasp with surprise and **vindication** - and the B that I was chewing on gets lodged in my throat. I try to cough. My face goes red, then blue. My throat swells. I draw blood clawing at my neck. The earthquake builds to a climax.

I fall to the floor. My wife just sits there, watching.

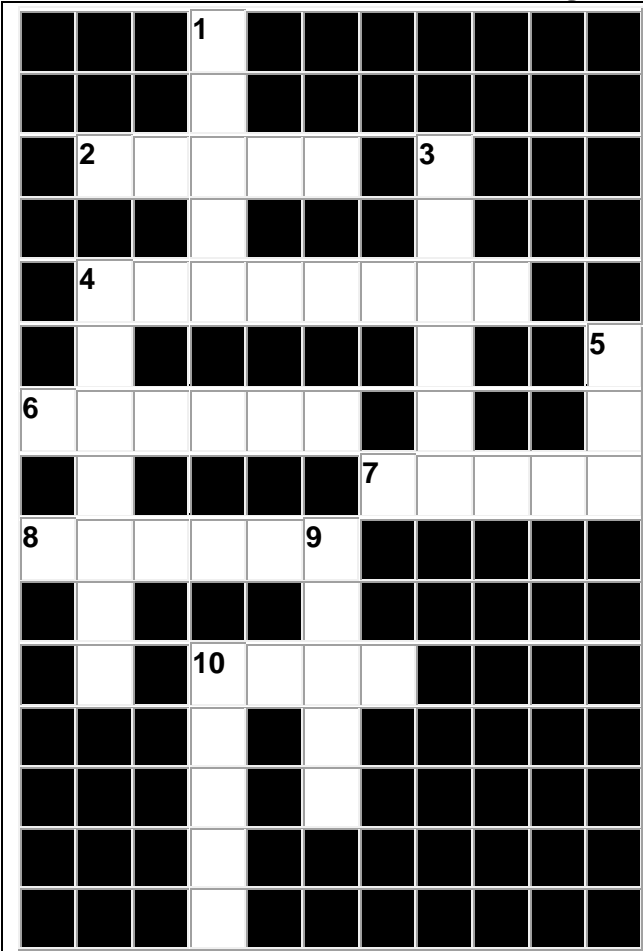
Death by Scrabble

by Charlie Fish

Learning Activity 1

- A. Do you play Scrabble? Share with your neighbour what you know about the game and whether you enjoy it. Alternatively, conduct an information search and share with your neighbour what you have found.
- B. Before you start to read 'Death by Scrabble', you should get to know some of the more difficult vocabulary in the text. Below is a crossword puzzle that should help you find your way through the story. All of the words in the puzzle are either words that are played in the game of Scrabble in the story, or words which the players want to play at a particular point in the game. Not only are these words part of the text, but they are also part of the development of the plot, so they are essential to understanding what is going on.

The Quiz

	<p>Across:</p> <p>2 Cut with a knife</p> <p>4 Winning by breaking the rules</p> <p>6 Crime of killing someone</p> <p>7 Start</p> <p>8 Unlucky</p> <p>10 Kill violently</p> <p>Down:</p> <p>1 Shake very quickly</p> <p>3 Not pay attention</p> <p>4 Take care</p> <p>5 This keeps you cool</p> <p>9 The end of life</p> <p>10 What you do when you go to bed</p>
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The box on the next page contains the words that you need to complete the crossword. But before you look at them, try completing as many as you can. When you have answered every question that you know, check with your neighbour and then look at the words on the next page together.

Crossword Answers

Below are the words that you can use to complete the crossword.

cheating	begin	jinxed	murder	sleep	fan
	slay	ignore	quake		
	death	caution	slash		

Glossary

Additional vocabulary with meanings

The list below contains vocabulary not covered in the crossword activity. The words all appear in the text and their meanings have been given to help you. The number in brackets is the number of the line where you will find these words.

crap (6)	very bad
Mount Kilimanjaro (9-10)	the highest mountain in Africa
Hollywood blockbuster (10)	major American movie
Vendee Globe (10)	a round-the-world boat/yacht race
a 60-foot clipper (11)	an old type of ship with sails
chewing (15)	from the verb to chew – what we do when we are eating our food
frayed (15)	torn at the edges
sweatier (23)	comparative adjective from the noun sweat or the verb to sweat - the drops of water on our body when we are hot
strangle (24)	attack someone by squeezing his or her throat
lousy (27)	very bad
static shock (32)	sudden shaking caused by electricity that collects on the surface of objects when they come into contact with each other
surfing the thermals (72)	thermals refers to the hot air that rises from the ground; the expression functions as a metaphor for the way the fly hovers around the teacup
vindication (86)	proof showing that something is right or true

C. Before reading the story, answer the following questions.

There are two characters in the story. Look back at your answers to the crossword you completed and guess:

1. What do you think their relationship is? Are they friends? Brother and sister? Husband and wife? Girlfriend and boyfriend?
2. Do they like or dislike each other?
3. Where and when does the story take place?
(Think about the time of year. Are they at home or maybe on holiday? Are they alone?)
4. Why are they playing this game?
(For money? Are they bored? Are they waiting for someone?)

Learning Activity 2

A. Read the story once. Then go back to the pre-reading questions and see if your answers are correct.

B. Now write the answers to the questions.

1. I think that the two people are _____
because _____
2. I think they _____
because _____
3. I think the story takes place in _____
_____ and _____
because _____

4. I think they are playing the game because _____

The reason why I think so is that _____

Learning Activity 3

Try answering the questions below which will help you understand the story better.

1. Fill out the blanks in the table below. It contains the words that the husband thinks will tell him what to do with his wife.

- a. M_ _ _ _ _ b. K_ _ _ c. S_ _ _

2. Read the following statements and decide whether they are true (T) or false (F).

a.	It is a hot day and the husband is falling behind in the game.	
b.	He is in a bad mood because his wife prefers playing scrabble to going out.	
c.	The husband has the habit of chewing on the tiles while playing.	
d.	Although the letters the husband has are not very good, he does get to play one of the words in Question 1.	

3. Why does the husband feel pleased when he plays the word ZAPS?

4. What is the eight-letter word the husband plays that enables him to come from behind and lead in the game? What does the word tell us about his action?

5. Name the three words which make things happen and which lead the husband to think the game is controlled by some evil power.

a. E _ _ _ _ _ _ _ b. _ H _ _ _ _ _ _ c. _ _ PS

6. What happens to the husband when his wife plays the word DEATH?

Learning Activity 4

A. From your understanding of the text, what do you think the answers to the questions below are? Support your answers with information and examples from the text.

1. According to the story, the husband:

- a) really wants to murder his wife
- b) is hot, tired and bored
- c) is frightened his wife will beat him at Scrabble again

The reason why I think so is that _____

2. The words in the tiles that the husband plays:

- a) convince him to kill his wife
- b) prove that the heat is driving him mad
- c) show his internal struggle with his own feelings

The reason why I think so is that _____

3. The quake at the end of the story:

- a) is real and causes him to swallow the tile and die
- b) is the sound of the air conditioning unit falling again
- c) is not a quake but the fact that his wife has won

The reason why I think so is that _____

- B. Discuss with your partner what the theme of 'Death by Scrabble' is. The theme of any story is what you as a reader think it is. Different people may see different themes. Here are some suggestions to help you.

anger	marriage	revenge	love	hate
	divorce	jealousy	money	
power	passion	good	evil	

The theme of the story is, in our opinion, _____

We think this because _____

Learning Activity 5

Insert an 80-100 word dialogue after paragraph 16 which will intensify the tension between the man and his wife before they return to the scrabble board. The first line has been given to you below:

She plays FAN, with the F on a double-letter, and gets up to fill the kettle and turn on the air conditioning.

MAN: What? Are you quitting?

WOMAN: _____

MAN: _____

It's the hottest day for ten years and my wife is turning on the kettle. This is why I hate my wife. I play ZAPS, with the Z doubled, and she gets a static shock off the air conditioning unit. I find this remarkably satisfying.