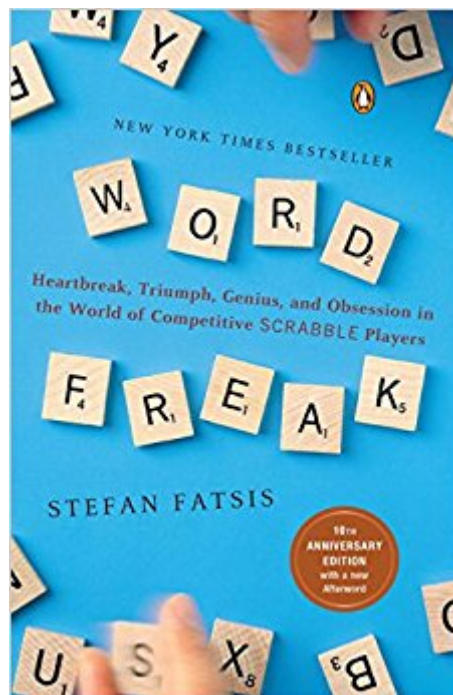




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# Word Freak: Heartbreak, Triumph, Genius, And Obsession In The World Of Competitive Scrabble Players



## Synopsis

Scrabble may be truly called America's game. But for every group of "living-room players" there is someone who is "at one with the board." In *Word Freak*, Stefan Fatsis introduces readers to those few, exploring the underground world of colorful characters for which the Scrabble game is life-playing competitively in tournaments across the country. It is also the story of how the Scrabble game was invented by an unemployed architect during the Great Depression and how it has grown into the hugely successful, challenging, and beloved game it is today. Along the way, Fatsis chronicles his own obsession with the game and his development as a player from novice to expert. More than a book about hardcore Scrabble players, *Word Freak* is also an examination of notions of brilliance, memory, language, competition, and the mind that celebrates the uncanny creative powers in us all. A Book Sense 76 pick.

## Book Information

Paperback: 416 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; 20th ed. edition (July 30, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0142002267

ISBN-13: 978-0142002261

Product Dimensions: 5.5 x 0.9 x 8.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.8 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 148 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #308,019 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #16 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Board Games > Scrabble](#) #239 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Word Search](#) #265 in [Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Word Games](#)

## Customer Reviews

Like a cross between a linguistic spy and a lexicographic Olympic athlete, journalist Stefan Fatsis gave himself a year to penetrate the highest echelons of international Scrabble competition. *Word Freak* is the account of his journey. It's a wacky grab bag of travelogue, history, party journal, and psychological study of the misfits and goofballs whose lives are measured out in Scrabble tiles. Fatsis gives us all the facts about Scrabble--from the story of the down-on-his-luck architect who invented the game in the 1930s to the intricacies of individual international competitions and the corporate wars to control the world's favorite word game. He keeps the reader turning the pages as

we get involved in the lives of the Scrabble obsessives: men and women who have a point to prove against the world and have chosen Scrabble as their playground and their pulpit. As Fatsis goes on his own quest to attain the coveted 1600 rating, we actually get obsessed with him as he lies awake at night pondering moves and memorizing lists of words. For anybody who is interested in words, *Word Freak* provides an entertaining and absorbing read. --Dwight Longenecker, .co.uk --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

It takes a special kind of person to be able to rattle off all the words that start with the letter q but don't require a u or to immediately recognize that the same letters used for the word "troutmania" can also spell "maturation" and "natatorium." These talented individuals are the subject of Fatsis's tell-all on the professional Scrabble realm's inner sanctum. The Wall Street Journal sports reporter (and author of *Wild and Outside*) began simply as a curious journalist but was soon obsessed, befriending dozens of experts in his passage from "living room player" to the continent's 180th (or so) best player. The book entertainingly and admiringly portrays the irreverent crowd that lives, eats and breathes Scrabble, interspersing mini-profiles with updates on Fatsis's progress and historical facts about the game. Among the cast of characters familiar with words like "eloiners" and "loxodrome" are "G.I." Joel Sherman, who directs the Manhattan Scrabble Club despite his dental problems, asthma attacks and lactose intolerance; Matt Graham, a stand-up comedian who let Scrabble fill the void when he got fired from his gig at Saturday Night Live; and Steve Williams, a Harvard grad with psychiatric problems, also the winner of the 1977 New York City championship. Fatsis gives an in-depth Scrabble history, too from portraying Alfred Butts, the game's meticulous Depression-era inventor, to explaining how Hasbro manages to sell over one million sets a year with minimal advertising. Journalistic, expressive prose helps transform this potentially dry account of some word-obsessed oddballs into a funny, albeit vertical, glimpse at one of America's quirkiest special-interest groups. (July 10)Forecast: Are there 25,000 hardcore Scrabble fans out there? Hard to say, but Houghton Mifflin is counting on it, and in order to reach them, the house is taking an NPR sponsorship (Fatsis is an NPR contributor) and sending the author on a six-city tour. He is booked on the Today Show. Copyright 2001 Cahnners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Who knew there even was such a thing as professional Scrabble? For enthusiastic amateurs like me (I have the original score cards from games with my father more than 50 years ago), Scrabble is an enjoyable brain exercise and genteel social activity. For the characters in this book, however, the

game is to memorize thousands of eligible words (definitions be damned, for the most part) and meet up at tournaments around the country to vie for enough prize money to travel to the next tournament, and bragging rights. Unlikely as it seems -- after all, it's a board game -- there's obsessive competitiveness, political intrigue, corporate business machinations, and personality quirks galore, not to mention arcane gaming strategies and, oh yes, a love of language. The organizing theme is the quest by author (and NPR stalwart) Stefan Fatsis to qualify as a tournament Scrabble expert within a year. Along the way, he expounds on the development of the present game and meets its leading practitioners, each of whom is a dedicated eccentric. Playing online, as I do night and day, is utterly bland compared to the non-stop colorful encounters described in "Word Freak." My only cavil, Stefan, if you're reading this, is to stop dismissing lower-tier players generically as "blue hairs." That hurts. Otherwise, a highly entertaining inside look at an American classic.

This book gave me motivation to play competitive Scrabble back in 2008. I now gift it to any senior student who graduates from my Scrabble Club at a local high school. It really portrays the world and personalities of competitive and club Scrabble, but don't get the idea that everyone who plays this game is as strange as the characters in this book! (no offense to those characters, just I will never be able to dedicate that much of my life to Scrabble!)

I'm a word freak, so I really liked this fascinating glimpse into the world of competitive Scrabble. I haven't dipped my toe into those particular waters, but understand the irresistible siren song of games and the obsession of those who play them. It has good information for those considering playing Scrabble competitively. It can be enjoyed at many levels, but the very top players put in many hours memorizing every possible admissible word--more than the average person is willing or able to do. I thought the author was a little dismissive of the "blue-hairs". I'm sure some middle aged middle class women are exceptional players. All in all, I thoroughly enjoyed the descriptions of the characters at the top that pinnacle.

Since I paid just \$1 for the only dilapidated copy, I suppose I can't complain. It came in record time. The price was probably a lot for this nearly destroyed but readable copy. I think you should admit that it is a dilapidated discard from a library and in readable but very poor condition. I am still considering giving it as a gift to a fellow Scrabble enthusiast but with the note that she might find a better copy at the library nearest her. That's where I found the copy I read and enjoyed.

I first got this book while I was in high school and the idea of Scrabble as an intellectual pursuit as put forth in the original edition was highly fascinating to me. Now, I've reread this book many a time, and this rereading was almost no different, except for the new afterword at the end by Stefan Fatsis. In that new afterword, Fatsis says a lot of people told him that the original version of Word Freak changed their lives. Add me to that list only to a lesser extent. This is one of my all-time favorite books and I am stoked to finally have a version I can reread over and over again! I don't think five stars is enough for this book in any form, and especially Kindle.

This book is a damn good read, and I loved it. What struck me the most is the fact that Stefan started out writing a book about the players, but very quickly became one of the players himself -- and a pretty good one at that. The story is well-written and intriguing, and I was captivated by the characters. So much so that I'm considering a trip to Washington Park next summer (after it warms up!) to meet some of them. (Much has been written about the individual characters, so I won't add to that.) I read a reviewer who compared this book, and the movie "Word Wars", to a Crossword Puzzle documentary, and he disparaged the author for focusing on the characters so much. The reviewer thought the author was doing some of the Scrabble players a disservice, by making them out to be freaks. Unfortunately for the reviewer, that is exactly what makes this book so much fun! There is only so much you can do with Scrabble itself, and its history. It is the characters that make it interesting, and it was the characters that the author sought to write about. Seems like someone missed that point altogether. (NOTE: watch "Word Wars", which expands on four of the main characters, and the Scrabble "underworld". It's *\*well\** worth the time!) Great stuff. Now, it's time to start memorizing two- and three-letter words!

if you love Scrabble you HAVE to read this fascinating book!!

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