

Librarian in Jeopardy!

By Elaine Noonan Skopelja

My long trip to appearing on *Jeopardy!*® began, strangely enough, with fried Twinkies. Yes, that Twinkie, the ageless snack cake. But I will get back to that. Meanwhile, like most librarians, especially reference librarians, *Jeopardy!*® was my favorite game show. I would annoy my family by constantly shouting out answers to the televised show, and would get a lot of them right. I was full of useless knowledge which guaranteed that no one would play Trivial Pursuit with me either. My library colleagues knew that researching obscure questions was a source of pride and joy to me, although being such a maven could get me teased as well. Although I did not mind the "Ms. Information" title, I did draw the line at being referred to as "Cliff Clavin," the dorky character who was the purveyor of dubious factoids on the television show *Cheers*.

My wealth of generally useless knowledge was a byproduct of not only my obsessive reading habit, but my early career working reference at the Lake County Public Library in Merrillville, Ind. As all reference librarians know, we have a huge capacity for information in general and often trivia in particular, acquired by answering common and uncommon questions every single day. Who else can go from answering questions about nuclear physics to finding out who played first base for the Chicago Cubs in 1969? Pretty quickly, too, I might add, even in the pre-Internet day.

So, back to the Twinkies. The *Jeopardy!*® *Brain Bus*, the show's traveling audition production, was coming to the Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis in August 2003 and I decided to try out. What I did not realize was that the wait would be over two hours long and that 1200 or so people would be in line. Being Indiana in August it was over 90 degrees and the food vendors around the queue were

selling fried Twinkies, fried Snickers bars, fried Oreos and fried pickles. I had a lot of time to contemplate the fry-ability of myriad food products. However, I am a food purist and did not care for the idea of tampering with the Twinkie's pure and natural state. Eventually though, I finally entered the building. Everyone in line completes a 15-question test, which is quickly graded. At that point, some people were handed letters and some were thanked and sent on their way. I got one of the coveted letters which invited me to the Indiana Convention Center to take an additional test the next day. Thankfully, I was able to leave work early and join the two groups of about 100 or so each. We entered the testing area in our group of 100 and were given a really tough test comprised of 50 questions. Each question flashed up on a screen for only eight seconds, and that's all the time you had to fill in the appropriate blank before the next question appeared. It was very, very challenging and covered computers, opera, literature, current events, country music, celebrities, geography and a lot more that I have forgotten. I did not finish all the questions, but answered most of them. The tests were graded in about 20 minutes, and then the producers returned and starting calling out names. If your name was called, you were in. My group had 20 people left after this cut and I was proud to see that I was among three librarians in the group. **LIBRARIANS RULE!**

Now came the really hard part. We had to stand in front of the three producers and play an actual abbreviated *Jeopardy!*® game and also be interviewed. They urged us to speak up, be lively and act like we were having fun, while they took extensive notes. Obviously they were trying to filter out those who froze on camera, couldn't enunciate clearly or couldn't project the necessary "personality." Acting is definitely a part of the tryout. Trying

to appear confident and competitive with a sense of humor while trying to answer tough questions is all it takes!

The producers ask guests to fill out a form with anecdotes about themselves that the host Alex Trebek will select to use on the show. His introductory question involves one of those questions. The producers tell guests that they may or may not be contacted in the next 14 months. There are no promises. After 14 months with no call, tryouts begin all over again. It would be 7 months before I heard from them.

The long-awaited call came at work, with one month's notice for the filming date in April (the air date would not be until September). Contestants have to pay their own airfare and lodging in Culver City, Calif., but the show does offer a discount on the hotel room. You get six tickets to the show for your family, and three of my siblings, all three children, and one brother-in-law got to attend. My children were all in a delirium of inflated expectations, thinking that I would be winning enough money to buy all of them new cars, etc. As if I would buy them cars before MY inflated expectations were fulfilled! Meanwhile, in true librarian fashion I was doing research on the show and deciding how to study. I used several listservs including the *Jeopardy!*® forum on *Television without Pity*, the *Jeopardy!*® website, and several independent blogs and postings. The overall advice was to practice your buzzer skills while watching the actual televised show (using a ballpoint pen works fine, although the buzzer itself is a bit thicker). This is still one of the best pieces of advice to potential contestants, as we will see.

Although the show tests general knowledge, most questions don't delve too deeply into, say, history, until you get to the highest value questions, the \$1000 and \$2000 questions at the end of each round. Of course, you are better off sticking to the basics when preparing because you do not know what categories will appear until the show begins. The text that I found to be the best was the *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* which presents basic cores of knowledge. For instance, basic information about French impressionist painters would include the following: what was impressionism?; what was the time period?;

who were the most famous?; what were some famous works?; who did they influence?, etc. Other important study tips that would have the best chance of being useful were reviewing geographical atlases, reviewing U.S. presidents, keeping up with current events, and perusing a biographical dictionary. However, you could spend hours studying the wrong things, so it's best not to get too obsessive about it. A new Wikipedia site which did not exist in 2004 is the *Jeopardy!*® Recurring Categories page, which should help focus your research. To get used to the answer/question format, see the *J! Archive*, which archives every answer and question and other valuable information for almost every game for the last 15 years.

Meanwhile, at Sony Studios, 13 contestants are ushered under heavy guard into the "green room" where we must stay in seclusion until our show is filmed. Five shows are filmed in one day, so three changes of clothes are required in case you win and need to make it look like it's the next day. Alex just changes his suit. The contestants are drawn at random to select the two who play the first game. Our current champion turned out to be Ken Jennings, a now familiar name, who was then on his 47th game. No one had heard of Ken at this time, since none of his shows had aired yet. I cannot tell you how terribly deflating it was to find out that he was the 46 day winner. There was an air of desperation in the green room as we all looked at each other with looks of disbelief. Our roles as cannon fodder were cemented when he absolutely destroyed the first two contestants pitted against him.

Ken had excellent manners, but was extremely competitive and a bit of a smart aleck. He had been a regular on the College Quiz Bowl, so he was a game show natural. He also had the fastest buzzer thumb I have ever seen on the show, aided by 46 games worth of practice. We could not even get to many questions, since he buzzed in on nearly every one of them. Note: The buzzer is timed with lights that appear on the stage after the answer is read, and you have to train yourself to buzz in sync with the lights. Buzz in early and you are locked out.

I was nervous at first, but soon the spirit of competition jumped in and I quickly forgot my anxiety and tried to buzz in on every question I

could, not always successfully. You are advised NOT to look at your running score, because it is very distracting, so I took some risks.

As it turns out, my game was no different than the 46 "Ken games" before mine and the 30 games after me. I did beat Ken's score for about three seconds in the early part of the game, a video shot which my children have freeze-framed and I have saved as a memento. Of course, Ken had the game locked up by Double *Jeopardy!*® time and was just toying with us after that. He gave me an incredulous look when I missed a question on the Indianapolis 500, but since I am originally from "Da Region" aka the Calumet Region/ Northwest Indiana, I am not a big Indy 500 fan. (He didn't know the answer either, so that helped—a little).

After all was said and done, I had a great time in California with my family. The show's producers, makeup people and crew couldn't have been nicer and more helpful. They also made snarky comments about *Wheel of Fortune* contestants (filmed in the next studio) versus *Jeopardy!*® contestants, which I found hilarious. I suggested to one of the producers that they create a "Ken Jennings Roadkill Tournament" for all of his many defeated contestants, but alas, we cannot be on the show again. So all I am left with is my creepily staged picture taken with Alex Trebek, my taped game, and my memories of Ken and fried Twinkies. Actually in my memories the imaginary Ken has started morphing into a giant Twinkie (the coloring is similar), but he still always wins.

Helpful Sites

Television without Pity (check out the *Jeopardy!*® Forum under the Game Shows category)

<http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/>

Jeopardy!® (Includes links to the Jeopardy Contestant Registration and Message Board)

<http://www.jeopardy.com/>

J! Archive (Fan-created archive of Jeopardy! Games and Players which includes all answers/questions)

<http://www.j-archive.com/>

Ken Jennings (Wikipedia)

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ken_Jennings

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