FOSHEE MAGICALLY INTERPRETED

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Martin Gardner notes that Lewis Carroll begins *Alice in Wonderland*:

Alice was beginning to get very tired of sitting by her sister on the bank, and of having nothing to do; once or twice she had peeped into the book her sister was reading.

Gardner now asks the reader to select any of the first 12 words. He continues:

“Starting on the next word, spell the word you chose, tapping a word for each letter. For example, if you selected the word ALICE you spell A-L-I-C-E. Counting words for letters, this takes you to the word VERY. Then four words later we get BY. Keep going. Note the word on which your spelling chain ends. What’s the word?”

We will try to predict your answer later. Meanwhile, in order to obtain the mysterious, deeper meaning to Gary Foshee’s poem “The Soldier” we ask the reader to roll a die and count to the word located at the rolled number. Continue using Gardner’s method until you end the spelling sequence. Write down the last three words of the chain; this is the hidden meaning, the soul, of Foshee’s work, at least to you.

And everyone else too! No matter what number you rolled on the die, the last words will be “I AM BROTHER”. For the ALICE piece, the end word will always be “SISTER”! What goes on here? Is this black magic?

Actually no magic black or otherwise is happening. Instead these are instances of Kruskal’s principle, a mathematical theorem that says that, with high probability, a common sequence is eventually found in any long text so that the same words are eventually zeroed in on no matter what the start. Julian Havil, in his 2008 Princeton University Press book *Impossible?*, explains the probabilities in detail. Our two examples are simple instances of the principle.

The late Princeton physicist Martin Kruskal had rediscovered his principle in the 1970s. It first appeared in an article “Sum Total” in the December 1957 issue of the magic periodical *Ibidem* by magician Alexander F. Kraus.

Kruskal had two mathematically inclined brothers, William at the University of Chicago and Joseph of Bell Labs. All three were friends of Martin Gardner who had earlier written about their mother, Lillian Oppenheimer, a remarkable origamist.