

## ROSS AND FAITH ECKLER – A MEMOIR

David Morice  
Iowa City, Iowa

**This Kickshaws colu(mn is dedicated to the memory of Ross Eckler, a giant in the field of wordplay, a person who knew the English language and a vast number pf amazing words. His knowledge was overflowing. Faith, his wife, was his devoted inspiration and his dedicated helpmate. Word Ways readers loved him, and hes loved the readers. May he rest in peace with a heavenly dictionary held high in his hands. –Dave Morice, Kickshaws**

### ~ ROSS AND FAITH ECKLER: A MEMOIR

In 1984, I moved back to St. Louis,, my hometown, after living in Iowa City for 12 years. There were two opposite reasons for moving—my mother was dying of skin cancer, and my girlfriend Milagros and I were planning on getting married. Milagros and I met at Washington University. My mother, who worked there, too, introduced us.

On of the first things I had to do in St. Louis was get a job. I applied for a positioin at the International Hojuse at Washington U, and I got itt. After the interview, I went to the university bookstore to browse. That bookstore visit changed my literary life. A book caught my eye, an unusual book titled *Names and Games*, by Ross Eckler. I snapped it up and glanced through it. I'd never seen such a book before. I looked at the back cover and saw that there was a a magazine called Word Ways that came out quarterly. After buying a few issues, I decided to go all the way and buy the entire run for \$100, a very cheap price. The day they arrived in the mail was the day I arrived in wordplay heaven. I submitted an article titled "Palindromania" to the editor, and he accepted it. I had lots of ideas for articles. I was especially fascinated by Kickshaws, which Dave Silverman edited for several years. At this time, he was no longer around. Word Ways was looking for guest editors.

I wrote to Ross and asked if I could guest edit Kickshaws for an issue. He agreed, and I spent hours honing the column. I wanted it to be perfect. I sent it off to Ross, and he replied with a very upbeat letter. Later on, I asked to do another guest Kickhaws, and he ws all for it. Again I tried for perfedtion and variety, and again he complimented me on the job. The next guest editor, I believe, was Jeff Grant, who wote a very interesting column on several topics I wasn'tvery familiar with. I began to realize how vast wordplay was. I told Ross that I'd be happy to write a column any time.

Then came one of the most surprising letters I'd ever received. Ross wrote and asked me if I'd like to become the permanent Kickshaws editor. I was sitting in the kitchen with my wife. I was holding my son Danny. I decided to go down and see if there was any mail. There was! In it Ross told me that he had one more guest editor lined up and after that I could be the Grand Panjandrum of the column. I couldn't wait.

Editing the column taught me more about wordplay than I'd ever dreamed possible. The first few issues took a little time to gain momentum and more importantly to gain people who would write short Kickshaws about their own word interests. Once people got used to my presence, Kickshaws became a lively treasure chest of words with new forms of wordplay in almost every column.

My mission in Kickshaws had been twofold. I was following Dave Silverman's lead: (1) Keep the item short at least most of the time. (2) Encourage a lot of variety in form, challenges, games, puzzles, and content from the people who were writing for the column. It has been great fun!

While I was everyone else's Kickshaws editor, Ross was my editor. I would send him a new Kickshaws column, and when I got the magazine there would be corrections that Ross made. One major flaw, a lifetime flaw. I rarely met the deadline. My *drop dead* deadline was occasionally 2 to 4 days after the normal actual. But Ross was a very forgiving guy.

He was also a brilliant mathematician. And he loved working with his wife Faith, also a wordplayer. They were a perfect pair. When my son Danny and I visit the Ecklers, they were the most gracious hosts. Ross asked Danny if he'd like to see a ballet, and he put on one out of his large collection. He also showed us his cabinet of puzzles (not jigsaw puzzles, but, rope and wood puzzles. Ross and Faith took us on a hike through the woods; and they showed us a fantastic toy train set that a man had built into his basement. Danny was especially impressed.

One disagreement that Ross and I had involved a particular reading of the Tarot Deck. I told him that a friend of mine, Steve Toth, gave me a Tarot reading. I was planning on breaking up with my girlfriend, and I wanted to see what the Tarot would reveal anything of interest. My friend, by the way, is not one to play a trick on someone. He took his deck out of its pouch and placed the 17 cards their position on the floor following the standard Waite-Rider directions. All 17 were placed face down so that neither reader nor subject knew in advance what the card would be. Then Steve turned the first one over, and the image on the card was upside-down in relation to me where I was sitting. He read the meaning in the book, and then he turned the next card. It too was upside-down, too. To make a long story short, Steve and I turned over all 78 of the Tarot cards, ALL, including those in the unpicked pile, were upside-down. I asked what Ross, the statistician, what he thought of that. He said, "It couldn't happen. Your friend was paying a trick on you." I disagreed. I said, "then how could any Tarot toss happen?" I estimated, thanks to a pocket calculator, that there were 40 quadrillion possible tosses in which all the cards were upside down (or right side up), but Ross was adamant. He said that there could be no all ups down toss of the cards without a trick behind it.

.On this visit, Ross asked me a very difficult question. He said that he'd be resigning from Word Ways in a few years, 15 or 20, and would I like to take over the ownership and editorship. I told him I'd love to, but I was a poor boy with no funds or time to handle such a job, and I wouldn't be able to do the double job of assembling Word Ways and continuing doing Kickshaws. I said I might if there was a good amount of pay. "Word Ways," he said, "is a labor of love." In spite of how much it was a labor of love for me, too, I told him that the labor would go far beyond the love. I also told him that if I were to take over Word Ways, the magazine would probably fold months.