

Riddle me this

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Till the Siamese twins you spy.

The leaves crunched beneath careful steps, steps slowed by searching eyes. The autumn wind sent leaves twirling to the ground. But here, in this part of the forest, the only evidence of the wind was the whishing sound from beyond, as it blew by.



Letterboxers write their letterboxing names - Eric's is "Ram Man" - in the logbook, and decorate the book with their unique wood-carved or rubber stamps to show they've been there.
(Staff photo by VINCENT DEWITT)

The clue, at first obscure, soon made perfect sense. The twins were there. The prize was near, covered in leaves, rocks and bark. Tenderly but swiftly, the faux covering was removed. In a hole dug into the ground rested the Legend of Scargo letterbox.

It was a plastic container - cheap bounty but worthy of the search. Baggies secured the contents - a carved stamp depicting Scargo Tower; an ink pad; a logbook; and the legend, penned on yellowing paper - from the weather.

People mingled nearby, looking out over Scargo Pond. The seeker hid behind trees, lest the treasure be found by outsiders.

Flipping through pages of the logbook provided a history of those who had come before. Treasure seekers from near and far had left their mark - their own stamp (green dragon, blue trout, Hershey's kiss) and comments about their journey to this

place (it had been windy, rainy or perfectly sunny). More than 80 seekers had found the Legend of Scargo, placed here in July 2003.

No one would find the prize without these: poem and clues, paces and counted windows, pathways and compass. Everything led them to this place and, once the hunt was over, they had stamped the logbook and, in turn, marked their personal books with the tower stamp. Then they had closed the container, covered it back up - and left.

There are 60 such letterboxes on the Cape and islands and countless people who seek them out. Not all of their locations can be divined from a poem, as the Scargo one was. Sometimes they can be found following basic commands: Walk 40 paces, turn left. Or the route to the stash can be hidden within a tale. For example, if the Cape Cod Times were to hide a letterbox, the clues could be contained within a story about letterboxing.

It would say something like: *In the village of Iyannough's statue, begin where the money corner watches over former peddlers of fragrant wax.*

If you, the reader, were to hunt for such a Times letterbox, you'd need a few things: a stamp (wood-carved or store-bought), an ink pad, something to write with, a logbook, a compass with degree settings. Often, clues give instructions like *walk in a direction bearing 255 degrees, cross at lights, continue walking.*

You'll also need access to the Internet. You might start with the letterboxing.org Web site.

Letterboxing is a combination of orienteering, hiking, carving and detecting.

The boxes are hidden along less-traveled paths and trails near popular recreation areas. Some are in urban areas or *near buildings*. And many clues or the boxes themselves provide history of the area.

"We get to explore some areas that I would never have thought to go," said Mashpee letterboxer Rae Record, who in her six-year search for boxes has found them all over New England, Canada, Texas and New York.

Letterboxing vacations can almost be anywhere, because there are more than 12,300 hidden in the United States and Canada, with a handful in Costa Rica, Bermuda and Belize. ***There are no records of any in Brazil, but a Main Street church could be a nice place to stop and look around.***

The clues can be easy, difficult or virtually indecipherable. They can be out of order, **require Morse code** (-.-. -.-. -.. --), lead to backtracking or offer hints for later in the search.

"The wonderful thing about letterboxing is it is free from rules and constraints," Record said.

She ought to know. Record placed the first letterbox on Cape Cod and, she says, the first one in the nation that had clues written into a story.

"It's broad enough to pretty much allow whatever you can come up within your own imagination," Record said. "It's a great thing to do with my family and friends. There are some people who get up at the crack of dawn, and they're out."

Letterboxing is not an original American fascination. It began 150 years ago when a businessman in Dartmoor, England, left his card in a bottle and invited others to do the same. Word spread about the treat hidden alongside a pool, and soon people began leaving items all over the moors.



Eric Thompson, 11, of Bridgewater puts his stamp in a logbook found hidden in a Tupperware container at the end of a search he and his mother, Kim Thompson, negotiated around Hathaway Ponds in Barnstable. There are about 60 letterboxes hidden on Cape Cod. (Staff photo by VINCENT DEWITT)

In 1998, Smithsonian Magazine published a small piece about Dartmoor, where legend has it there are 10,000 letterboxes and a catalog to help you find the way. Each page contains directions to the next letterbox, such as ***travel southwest till you reach time sealed away.***

Letterboxing crossed the pond after the Smithsonian piece came out, and an American placed the first one in North Carolina, according to "The Letterboxer's Companion" by Randy Hall. Letterboxing North America was born soon after. Record was a charter member.

The outdoors is not the only place to find letterboxes, nor is ground level. One is hidden in a book in a library in Vermont. One is perched high in a tree in Kansas, near a limb the placer

once climbed as a child. Across the country, they are hidden up and down, inside and out.

Where they roam is also a variable. In most worlds, hitchhiking is a no-no. But in letterboxing, it's a welcome surprise. "Hitchhikers" are traveling stamps and logbooks that move from box to box as people find them. The idea is to pick up a hitchhiker and drop it off at the next box.

Kim Thompson and her son Eric found one near Hathaway Pond in October when they went to check a box she had placed there in March.

Eric, a computer fan whose stamp is called Ram Man, had never been to the box. But after 20 minutes of following paths, checking signs and looking for clues, he came to it hidden off a well-worn trail. Prying the box open, he found more than he expected. "It's a hitchhiker!" he said. "It's a hitchhiker!"

The traveler had been placed at Shawme-Crowell State Forest in Sandwich during a camping trip last year by Boy Scout Troop 540 out of Glastonbury, Conn. The hitchhiker had thumbed its way to Hathaway. The troop is eagerly waiting for the stamp-filled pages to be mailed home, said Dr. Brad Heim, the letterboxer of Troop 540. Where it has gone, nobody yet knows.

"We're just going to wait and see where it ends up," he said.

While hitchhikers can go anywhere, a few come with rules. Some can only travel in certain directions and only be moved 100 miles or less each time. Some dual hitchhikers start on each coast, with hopes of meeting somewhere in middle America.

"They're neat because it's like an extra surprise," Eric said.

Letterboxing is about collecting stamps, seeing sights, using your powers of observation and creative interpretation. ***Between the buildings you should wander, passing the backward iron letter and the cheerful face, perhaps dreaming of cash.***

But it can also be about so much more. For a few, letterboxing has led to love.

Record has proof. She planted her first letterbox, Secrets of the Knob, in 1999 near Quisset Harbor. The clues were in a story about two teenagers who met one summer, fell in love and promised to meet 10 years later. What happened after a decade passed is never shared, but Record has inspiration for a sequel.

On an icy winter day, Record and a male friend - he goes by the letterboxing character lonemasswolf - went to plant her letterbox. They stopped and took some pictures at a tree swing, one stop along the way to the box.

A year later, lonemasswolf used the picture when he joined the dating service match.com. A woman whose daughter lived on Cape Cod saw the picture and got in touch. The tree swing was one of her favorite places.

Their first date was letterboxing. They married in August. Her stamp is called "you inspire my spirit."

"It's a real, live romance," Record said. "I hid a letterbox at their wedding in Barre."

Since letterboxing involves discreet hiding places and clues, it has a sense of intrigue and secrecy.

Being clever, staying inconspicuous and having a knowledge of foreign languages is helpful. For instance, knowing Latin is a must in figuring out this clue: ***Past the bump, where space opens up, face 270 degrees. Choose not the sinister direction. Sashay the other way, pacing five steps times ten and doubling it again.***

Along with the intrigue, there is the stuff of legends: stamps, boxes, hitchhikers or letterboxers who gain a following.

The latest fad character is "leger de maine," whose clues are said to be so hard, few crack them. Leger de maine's face and real name are a mystery.

"He's building a persona, a mysterious persona," Record said.

The leger de maine legend is that one of his stamps and logbooks is in the folk art collection of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. They once resided beneath a drinking fountain in the Smithsonian Castle and, after the letterbox that held them was retired, the museum supposedly took it for their collection. This tidbit is in a 2002 posting leger de maine sent to a letterbox chat board.

But the former Smithsonian curator that leger de maine credits for making it possible denies the story.

"This has a vague ring of familiarity in terms of somebody approaching us," said Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, who now is the curator of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem. "We did not take any letterbox into the museum's collection."

Other leger de maine mementos are out there, including eight hitchhikers, named for famous dictators, hidden in Pandora's Box. When the letterbox was found, "it released all of the bad spirits," Record said.

One hitchhiking spirit made it to Nickerson State Park. "I found Stalin," Record said.

Tall tales abound in this world.

"I heard a rumor that there is one behind the guard at Buckingham Palace," Record said. "I don't know if there is a letter of truth to that."

There may even be one planted by the Cape Cod Times. ***Wooden planks beneath ribbons of red will lead you to glory.***

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