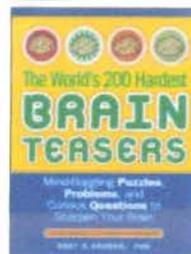


Books of laughter and forgetting

Marin answers the call for summertime lit!

The man with 200 brains

The World's 200 Hardest Brain Teasers: Mind-Boggling Puzzles, Problems, and Curious Questions to Sharpen Your Brain by Dr. Gary Gruber. SourceBooks. 188 pages. \$12.99. www.dr-garygruber.com



Imagine you're queuing up for a movie. There are four people in line. Sarah is in front of Barry and Mary. Mary is in front of two other people, and John is directly in front of Mary. Who's first in line, second, third and fourth?

If your answer is to skip the movie and go find more interesting friends to hang out with, *The World's 200 Hardest Brain Teasers* is not the book for you. But if you answered, John, Mary, Sarah and Barry—then Mill Valley puzzle-master Gary Gruber's book will be a bigger smash with you than a train headed west at 45 mph roaring on the same track toward a train headed east at 35 mph. Gruber, a test-prep and critical-thinking guru, offers up what he calls "the most challenging and thought-provoking questions in the world" (and also walks readers through the strategies to arrive at the correct answer).

A lot of these brain teasers are of the SAT-test type devils that you probably swore you'd never look at again after junior year, but, for us anyway, there's something strangely alluring about word correlations, number sequences and parallelograms now that entrance to the University of California isn't at stake.

Gruber explains his fascination with mind-boggling conundrums: "When I was in fifth grade I had to take an IQ test," he writes. "I scored 90, which is below normal and considered dull. I noticed my teachers were not paying that much attention to me and were patronizing me as if I were stupid. Later, as friends of mine were skipping grades, I was routed to the 'dull classes,' which embarrassed me and made me feel inferior. I felt as if I would never get far in life." Seemingly intelligent to his parents and teachers, Gruber developed a "fascination" with the kind of IQ test questions that require critical thinking skills—and soon came to realize that these skills could be developed through what he calls a "generic process to problem solving and thinking." Later in school, an IQ test landed him at 126; through more practice he eventually scored 150. His secret? It's all about "common sense and not racking your brain."

Gruber's coup de grace is a "simple" geometry question that took him three hours to solve when he was in high school, but 40 years later he tried again—and couldn't crack it. He eventually sought the advice of readers of the *Washington Post*, for whom he posed regular brain teasers, but none could provide the answer. Soon *Post* readers were demanding a solution and Gruber spent days contacting university math departments, NASA, his senile old high school teacher who'd originally posed the problem—but none could solve it. Finally, the author sat down and worked feverishly for days to finally arrive at the solu-