

Shmanners 259: Letterboxing

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Justin: This is Justin McElroy, and I got my little brother Travis McElroy here. We want to welcome you to not just this podcast, but the 2021 Max Fun Drive, which is gonna be running until May 14th. It's time for you to show your support for the shows that you love. Trav, how can they get on board?

Travis: You just go to Maximumfun.org/join, you pick a support level that's right for you, starting as low as just \$5, and if you're already a Max Fun supporter you could consider upgrading, but this is the time to do it, 'cause this is when you get those rewards, baby! Maximumfun.org/join.

Travis: I think letterboxing is pretty great.

Teresa: It gets my stamp of approval.

Travis: It's *Shmanners*!

[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you're listening to *Shmanners*!

Teresa: It's extraordinary etiquette.

Travis: For ordinary occasions! Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: [sighs] Man. I—you know, I thought earlier this spring my allergies were bad.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: But boy howdy! [laughs]

Travis: Well, you know, you've never really realized how bad your allergies are until your 16-month-old has bad allergies.

Teresa: Yep.

Travis: And then you're like, "It's all downhill." [laughs]

Teresa: Yep.

Travis: This is all—we got four allergy sufferers in the house now.

Teresa: Mm-hmm. Which is not uncommon in the Ohio River Valley, which is where we live.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Um, but man, I think that it's extra hard to have allergies as a person who can't talk about and complain their allergies.

Travis: Yeah. And you just have, like, a nozzle of snot open on your face at all times and you're just like, "Why do I feel bad? Wahh!"

Teresa: [laughs] That's a great impression of Dot right there. That's great.

Travis: Yeah. Well, that's it, is, like, the thing that is... I guess, like, maybe specific to Dot, but she's, like, fine until she realizes she's not.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Where she's just sitting there like, "Oh! Book? Read book? Book? Book?"

And you're like, "Oh yeah, book? Wanna read a book?" And you're readin' the book."

And then just halfway through the book she's just like, "Wait a minute! Wahh!"

Teresa: [laughs] Yeah, we are, uh—we're lovin' the mentholated rubs and such to try and open sinuses, and—

Travis: 'Cause it's both kids and both adults and one cat.

Teresa: [sighs heavily] Yeah. I forgot about the cat. She also has allergies.
[laughs]

Travis: Yeah. It's a whole thing. So, what are we talk—[high-pitched] are we talking about allergies?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Oh, okay.

Teresa: We're talking about letterboxing.

Travis: Now, here's the thing.

Teresa: Mm-hmm?

Travis: I am an avid geocacher. We've talked about it on the show.

Teresa: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Travis: I had no idea what this was. To me, letterboxing, when you said it, I thought of, like, the black bars around a movie.

Teresa: [gasps] Me too!

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: I did not know what this was.

Teresa: So, uh, I thought it was the way that you get a widescreen movie to fit in a full screen.

Travis: Yeah, you letterbox it.

Teresa: By letterboxing it. But not—no no, not that.

Travis: Which is also, if I'm not mistaken—because I have been called mad for this before on *My Brothers, My Brothers, and Me*—is, uh, that letterboxing can be done after the fact, and they will do that to movies—they'll, like, shoot it in, like, you know, [unintelligible] or whatever, and then put the black bars on it in post. And one time I saw a—a—I think it was *Night at the Museum* at the movies, and they had not applied the letter—or, like, it wasn't working in the projector or something? And I could like, see the cables running [crosstalk]—

Teresa: Like the cables and the boom?

Travis: Yeah. And, like, the apple boxes and stuff on the ground. Like, I could see all the equipment. And then, like, halfway through it was like someone went, "Oh—wha?" and flipped it on.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And I've talked about this and my brothers thought I was making it up. Anyways, we're not talking about that kind of letterboxing.

Teresa: We're not—not that letterboxing but, like you said, um, probably—let's say the great-great-grandfather of geocaching... who, uh, does not associate with that hipster, geocaching.

Travis: Oh, I see. Okay.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: So this is like the—he would walk into Baskin-Robbins and be like, "This ain't no soda fountain!"

Teresa: Exactly.

Travis: Okay, okay. Got it, got it, got it.

Teresa: Yeah. This actually was suggested by listener Paul.

Travis: Thank you, Paul.

Teresa: Thank you, Paul! Um... it's an outdoor hobby, right?

Travis: Okay. So that's—but that's where the pollen lives, don't you know?

Teresa: [through laughter] Yeah, it is. It is where the pollen lives.

Travis: Oh boy. That's where the pollen lives.

Teresa: Uh, that combines elements of orienteering, art, and puzzle-solving.

Travis: Orienteering, that's like map or, like, compass stuff, right?

Teresa: Yep, mm-hmm.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yep, compass stuff.

Travis: You were, like, a girl scout. I don't—I don't—the compa—I don't know what direction is what. I have no inherent sense of direction. I'm—I'm—can I be honest?

Teresa: Mm-hmm?

Travis: I'm not even 100% sure. Like, I know how a compass works. I know how to use it.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: But if somebody's like, "Go north!"

I think my response is just like, "Why?"

Teresa: [laughs] Oh, boy.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Um, so... and this combines to direct people to hidden letterboxes. Um, which are—

Travis: Like mailboxes?

Teresa: Sort of. Like little tin boxes that could perhaps hold papers, or postcards.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Like, the size of a postcard.

Travis: People do—by the way, since we're talking about this kind of thing, and I know you said that, uh, this grandfather wouldn't associate with geocaching. But I just saw a TikTok the other day of a geocache where the geocache was a straw that was, like, stuck in between, like, two boards of a bench. And, like, you had—like, inside was, like, the log, like, rolled up to—that you had to, like, poke through and pull out to sign.

Teresa: Wow.

Travis: Yeah. Yeah.

Teresa: I mean, that's one, like, litter-picker away from disappearing.

Travis: Yeah, I wouldn't recommend it. It's not...

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: It doesn't seem as long-lasting as some other options, but interesting.

Teresa: Okay. Well, so it's more of like an outside treasure hunt, right? Because unlike geocaching, that—geocaching relies heavily on GPS technology, right? 'Cause you can put a pin in it, and you find the coordinates, and use your phone, and all that kind of stuff, right?

Um, but this is—letterboxing is more of a traditional treasure hunting situation. Um, and they don't hold small trinkets and prizes.

Travis: They hold doubloons!

Teresa: Well, more like stamps. Not, like—like postage stamps, but, like—

Travis: Oh, like rubber stamps.

Teresa: —rubber stamps.

Travis: Got it.

Teresa: Ink pad stamps.

Travis: Hence the letters?

Teresa: Yeah, kinda.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. Okay. Um, so like I said, these letterboxes are usually, like, a weatherproof box hidden somewhere on a property.

Travis: Way better than a straw.

Teresa: Way better than a straw. Um, there is a notebook and a rubber stamp inside of it, and the stamp is specific to the letterbox, many of them very ornate, and obviously took lots of care to make. Um—

Travis: See, I can see why you would be more into this.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Than—than geocaching, right? Geocaching for me is the electronics, is the hunt. Nah, nah, nah, nah. I don't—I don't—I wanna get to it as quick as possible, you know what I mean? I would rather do as many geocaches in one day as I could.

Teresa: Ohh. Well, but this is about getting that stamp on your notebook.

Travis: Ugh.

Teresa: Like, being the collector for collecting's sake.

Travis: That seems like so much work! [laughs]

Teresa: I mean... yeah!

Travis: Eww! That's the problem with collections. You have to get all the stuff!

Teresa: Um...

Travis: No? That got noth—I thought that would at least—

Teresa: No.

Travis: —get a wry chuckle.

Teresa: No.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, when Paul actually wrote in to suggest this topic, he pointed out that there are also sometimes thing in letterboxes called hitchhikers. Um, so a little bit like travel bugs in geocaching. Hitchhikers are smaller stamps that people leave in letterboxes for finders to carry with them and plant in a new box.

Travis: The—the, uh—the bugs that she mentioned, they're, like, trackables, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Where it's just like, "Oh! This made it all the way to this place," kind of thing.

Teresa: Right. But this—the stamp is more just, you know, person-to-person. And, um, specifically thank you Paul for sending a picture in of one that he took upon himself to carve, uh, inspired by 20 Big Dog Run.

Travis: 20 Big Dog Run! For anyone listening who maybe isn't also a *My Brother, My Brother, and Me* listener, on *MBMBaM* we pick a theme for the year, and for 2021 it was 20 Big Dog Run.

Teresa: Mm-hmm!

Travis: No bones about it! That was the subtitle.

Teresa: [laughs] Okay. So, now we know what it is. When did it start?

Travis: Um... the year was [slowly] 1886.

Teresa: Hey! I mean—

Travis: [gasps]

Teresa: —not bad!

Travis: How close?

Teresa: The 1850's.

Travis: Oh, okay! Hey, for some of my past guesses? That's very close!

Teresa: Yeah! And it started in Dartmoor, which is in Devon, in England.

Travis: Oh, like Dart—Dartmoor, they talk about that I think in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*!

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: Maybe.

Teresa: Uh, so it started in 1854 with a man there named William Crossing, who was a writer and avid chronicler of life in Dartmoor.

Travis: I'm gonna guess it all started when Crossing misplaced his box of stamps.

Teresa: No. Not—not really. Um, but he wrote a book called *Guide to Dartmoor*, and in it he mentioned a well known Dartmoor guide.

Travis: Wait, he wrote a guide, and in it shouted out a different already well known guide?!

Teresa: [holding back laughter] Yes, I know.

Travis: Ugh! Come on.

Teresa: So, let's say that his guide was more of a manual, and exploration. Whereas this other guide was a dude who knew where stuff was.

Travis: Okay. Alright. I'll tell you which one I'd want, but that's not important to the story. Go on.

Teresa: James Perrott, um, who had placed a bottle for visiting cards at the Cranmere Pool, which is a small bog in the northern region of the town.

Travis: Been a long time since I've seen a good bog. When was the last time you saw a *good* bog? Like a *good* bog? A bog you could really sink into, you know?

Teresa: You know, where I grew up, um, in—in—

Travis: Dartmoor.

Teresa: —just outside of Dayton, Ohio.

Travis: Oh.

Teresa: Uh, we have a wetlands reserve, so I have seen many a good bog.

Travis: Yeah, but it's been a while, huh?

Teresa: Yeah, it has been a while.

Travis: Yeah. Ugh.

Teresa: So, hiking to this pool in the 1850's wasn't, like, a simple Sunday stroll that people in their hoop skirts could attempt, right? It was—

Travis: Mm-hmm, with their hula hoops and their hoop-and-sticks!

Teresa: [laughs] It was, uh—let's paint a picture here. Like a lot of England... [laughs quietly] it receives over 100 inches of rain a year. Um—

Travis: Oh wow. All at once.

Teresa: No.

Travis: In one day.

Teresa: No. And so the ground is very spongy, and muddy, and well, would you believe it? Boggy.

Travis: Yeah, that tracks.

Teresa: Um, and so—

Travis: I believe over there they pronounce it bogey.

Teresa: No, they don't.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: [laughs quietly] The easiest access point required a nine mile one-way hike through this difficult terrain. Um—

Travis: So I imagine, just to do my math real quick, 18 miles two-way, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Unless you got there and died. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: [laughs] Or were airlifted out.

Travis: Yeah, okay.

Teresa: By a hot air balloon.

Travis: Yeah. Okay.

Teresa: Um, okay. So it wasn't something that everybody was privy to, that everyone was constantly going to or whatever. And so you were able to be very proud of your accomplishment if you actually made it there and, you know, took part in putting your calling card in the bottle or whatever.

Um, and so more and more hikers really wanted this kind of bragging rights, right? And they actually began to leave letters and postcards along the trail to this bottle. Um, and it became so popular in 1888 that they upgraded the bottle to a small tin box. So passers-by would leave notes, sometimes addressed to themselves, other times to a friend or relative who might hike by in the tin box, and so the next person who discovered the box would collect the letters and postcards and mail them for everyone. So, this is where the term letterboxing was born.

Travis: You know what's really interesting about this? You know what it reminds me of? In a very one-for-one kind of way, in the video game series *Demon Souls* and *Dark Souls*...

Teresa: Uh-huh.

Travis: ... you can leave messages, like, in your game, that people in their game will see. Like, it's all online. So you can, like, leave a little message that's like, "Don't go down this tunnel!" Or like, "Do this salute here!"

Teresa: Oh yeah!

Travis: Right?

Teresa: I remember you playing those, and those little, like, ghost notes.

Travis: Right. And they'll just pop up like, "Don't jump!" Or "Jump here! Safe to land." Or whatever, right? And it was just, like, little messages along the path. And I wonder if also back then in the 1850's people would leave trolling ones like, "Safe to eat this bush! Hee hee hee hee."

[holding back laughter] It's like, "No, don't eat that bush! You'll poop," or whatever. I shouldn't say poop—oh no. Can I say that on *Shmanners*?

Teresa: You can say that on *Shmanners*.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, so this was all great fun for the people in the area. Um, but 40 years would pass before a second letterbox was set up, and then it would be 44 years after that that a third showed up. So, all told, it wouldn't—

Travis: So it didn't catch on too quick.

Teresa: No. I mean, it was part of, like, the mystique, and the hunt, and the thrill of finding something that wasn't, you know, super attainable.

Travis: So, this is so interesting, because to compare this to geocaching, geocaching seems to thrive on, uh, accessibility, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: Like, yeah, there are challenging ones. But, like, there's ones—look all around you, right? There's one right there in the middle of the park. Oh, check that bench you're sitting at. Look behind this thing.

Teresa: Right, yeah.

Travis: And where letterboxing seems a lot more like, "Nah, nah, nah, nah, nah. We're explorers."

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: "This is, like, a thing we're doing."

Teresa: Totally! Um, and then the rubber stamp officially appeared on July 22nd, 1907, placed by a man, John H. Strother.

Um, he recorded in the logbook...

Travis: "This a stamp!"

Teresa: No. [laughs]

Travis: [laughs] "You're welcome!"

Teresa: He said, "Reached the pool at 7:10 PM. Misty day with cool breeze, and would suggest that a rubber stamp, something like the post office stamps for

postmarking letters or rubber stamp for putting the address at the top of a piece of note paper be provided and kept here. If this were done, it would be proof that the cards posted really had come from the Cranmere."

Travis: Oh, I get it. Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. Yeah.

Travis: Alright. Okay!

Teresa: Alright.

Travis: I'm pickin' it up. And you know what else I'm pickin' up?

Teresa: What?

Travis: A thank you note to our sponsor!

[theme music plays]

Travis: This week, *Shmanners* is sponsored in part by Function of Beauty. I wanna say a special thank you to Function of Beauty, because they have made my hair game so much better, and feel so much more special.

See, at Function of Beauty, they have all kinds of different combination of not only, like, the product, the features, all that stuff, but the scents, you know? Mango, rose, pear, eucalyptus, there's all kinds of amazing scents at Function of Beauty that you can add to your customized shampoo and conditioner. They create unique, customized hair care formulas based on a short but thorough quiz to give your hair everything it needs, and to look and feel its best.

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It's amazing. I have at this point the shampoo, the conditioner, the hair mask, and the hair oil. I love them very, very much.

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[suspenseful sci-fi music plays in background]

Speaker 1: [through static] Mr. Robot Man, what are you doing?

Robotic Voice: I'm just taking... one last look... at my coworkers.

Narrator: Every journey comes to an end.

Master Kiarondo: Remember, Pleck. The space will be with you. Always.

Pleck: Sorry, who are you again?

Master Kiarondo: Master Kiarondo.

Pleck: Oh, right, right, right, sorry. [laughs]

Master Kiarondo: Just calling in.

Narrator: Friendships will be tested.

Speaker 3: Dar, you have to do it. You have to shoot Pleck. It's the only way to save us!

[gun cocking, laser sounds]

Robotic Voice: Wow, you shot him so fast.

Narrator: Destinies will be fulfilled.

[wings flapping]

Speaker 4: I've become a complete bird! I'm flying, I'm flying!

Narrator: On April 28th, the saga starts concluding.

Pleck: Guys, we don't have a choice. We have to put on a show!

Speaker 5: We can do it in the old barn! We got the costumes, we got a stage. We can do it, you guys!

[laughter]

Narrator: *Mission to Zyxx*, the final season, on Maximum Fun.

[music and advertisement end]

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Alright.

Travis: We stamped the stamp on the letter, and now let's mail it on home. And by letter I mean second half of the episode, and by on home I mean to the listener.

Teresa: Okay. Um, so it lasted this kind of, um, very... [sighs] let's—they were dotted here and there, and not for the faint at heart.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Until the 1970's.

Travis: When anybody with a heart could do it.

Teresa: N...

Travis: Faint or not.

Teresa: No.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: A man named Tom Gant in 1976—

Travis: All these people so far have had very explorer-y names.

Teresa: They sure have!

Travis: Thomas Crossing. Tom Gant.

Teresa: I would read a field guide by Tom Gant.

Travis: Yeah, see what I'm saying?

Teresa: Totally would. Um—

Travis: “What can't Gant do?” people would say in the blurbs.

Teresa: Oh. Yeah. Do—do it again. I didn't appreciate that.

Travis: “What *can't* Gant do?”

Teresa: Hmm.

Travis: That would be the blurb on the back.

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Written by, uhh... Albert Schweitzer?

Teresa: [laughs] Okay.

Travis: He was out there. He was doin' stuff.

Teresa: [laughs] Alright. So, he made a guide map pinpointing the 15 letterboxes in Dartmoor.

Travis: So at this point they're all in Dartmoor?!

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Yeah. It was a thing.

Travis: But this is, like, 1900's?

Teresa: 1976.

Travis: So by 1976, still they're all in Dartmoor.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Okay. Just—just getting on—

Teresa: But not for long! Because—

Travis: I mean, to be fair, for long, that's 120 years.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Since the first one. So I would say for long, but not for much longer.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: Um, he pinpointed the 15 letterboxes in Dartmoor, and now that things were mapped, there was a boom in letterboxing. The amount of people searching for the treasure boxes tripled that year alone, and by the 1980's, thousands of people had taken on the hobby, and these letterboxes started to distinguish themselves with trail names, and their own stamps.

And this is kind of like the glory day of letterboxing.

Travis: Oh yeah, I remember.

Teresa: Because peop—y—what?

Travis: No, I reme—I—I remember. There were movies about it—

Teresa: Ahh.

Travis: —and everybody wanted in. The high school jocks were all doing it. Even the—even the slacker kids could get into letterboxing.

Teresa: People began to leave clues to the boxes' whereabouts in the forms of riddles or puzzles or little games along the trail.

Travis: Wait, I actually am way into that.

Teresa: Yeah! You totally are.

Travis: Yeah, that's—yeah.

Teresa: And soon more and more people began to hear about this silly little game in the English moors. So, more letterboxes kept popping up throughout the English countryside, now in much more accessible places, within easy walking distance of main roads.

Now, that sounds a lot like geocaching, right?

Travis: Yes?

Teresa: Um—

Travis: I like how it seems like it's getting easier.

Teresa: It seems like it's getting easier, and then... this kind of, like, "One for all and all for one" approach wasn't really awesome, um, because people started to, like, pull apart historic rock walls, and started graffitiing the boxes.

Travis: Ugh.

Teresa: And generally vandalizing everything in the name of the treasure hunt, right?

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: So Dartmoor National Park didn't want to completely stop everyone from coming to their national park, right? But they also didn't want all of these things to be destroyed in the process. So, uh, they removed all but the Cranmere and the Duck's Pool letterboxes. Those two boxes are now permanent structures at this point, and also are historical sites.

Uh, a man named Godfrey Swinscow—

Travis: Get out!

Teresa: So many great names in this one.

Travis: Get out of the town!

Teresa: I know, right?

Travis: Okay.

Teresa: And he was affectionately nicknamed "God." [laughs]

Travis: Wow. That's affectionate to the extreme!

Teresa: Sure is. Um, he met with these Dartmoor officials, and basically said—

Travis: "[clears throat loudly] [gruff and indistinctly] We must continue letterboxes! [unintelligible grumbling]"

Teresa: No, no, no. Change it—turn it the other way. Uh, make it sound more like Colin Firth, and wine and dine them.

Travis: Okay, sweet.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: "[questionable Colin Firth impression] Now, we must—we must allow letterboxing."

Teresa: [through laughter] I don't—that's not Colin Firth.

Travis: "I'm—I'm Colin Fourth."

Teresa: No.

Travis: "The Fourth Colin."

Teresa: No. So, these are the new rules, according to what Godfrey—

Travis: God. Just say it.

Teresa: —God worked out with—

Travis: These are God's rules!

Teresa: —Dartmoor officials. Boxes should not be sited in any kind of antiquity, in or near stonerows, circles, cists, cairns, buildings, walls, ruins, peatcutters' or tanners' huts, etc.

Travis: Hmm.

Teresa: Um, meaning—

Travis: Don't go near the tanners' huts!

Teresa: Well, you know, don't mess with historical structures.

Travis: No, listen. All those other things too, especially when you get into, like, cairns? When you get into stone circles? Those things—it's not like they're glued together!

Teresa: Of course not.

Travis: You can mess those up real easy. We almost did when we were in Scotland. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: We almost did, but we did not.

Travis: No, we didn't. But on accident. Not like we were sitting there like, "Should we mess this up?"

Teresa: No, I think we almost, like, tripped over it, right?

Travis: Correct. [laughs]

Teresa: Yeah. Okay. Uh, two. Boxes should not be sites in—yeah, in any potentially dangerous situations where injuries could be caused. You know, like trees or caves or things like that.

Travis: Right. Hanging over some quicksand.

Teresa: Exactly. Three. Boxes should not be sited as a fixture. Cement or any other building material is not to be used. Right? So, like—

Travis: It has to be removable.

Teresa: Right. They need to be removable, um, because, like, this is a national park, right?

Travis: Right.

Teresa: So, like—

Travis: And if they break any of these rules, we need to be able to get rid of 'em.

Teresa: Exactly. Exactly. Um, so it grew in popularity. It transitioned from letters to stamps and a logbook. And, um, the letterboxes exploded in Dartmoor, whereas now Dartmoor Letterboxes created a membership to the 100 Club, meaning that anyone who found all 100 letterboxes on the moors could join the club and, you know, get their handful of prestige. But even though now there are way more than 100 letterboxes.

Travis: Are they all... still... in Dartmoor?

Teresa: No.

Travis: Okay. I—I was starting to think, like, no one outside of Dartmoor would—people would be listening to this episode like, "[quietly] What are they talking about?"

But everyone in Dartmoor would be losing it. [laughs quietly]

Teresa: But it is—like, the Dart—Dartmoor is like the epicenter.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Right? Um, so it became incredibly popular, with thousands of hikers gathering for box hunts. Um—

Travis: [snorts]

Teresa: Yeah. I mean, that makes sense. Don't laugh at me!

Travis: I know. No, it's not that. I was picturing a fox hunt, but for a letterbox.

Teresa: Uh-huh?

Travis: And, like, the dogs running and the [crosstalk]—

Teresa: I think that's—I think that's what it's supposed to conjure up!

Travis: And it—and it did! It made me happy!

Teresa: Okay. Here's what happened, and how letterboxing came to our shores.

Travis: Okay. I thought you were about to say a bad thing that happened.

Teresa: No.

Travis: Like, that somebody died.

Teresa: Mm-mm. No. The Smithsonian Magazine covered it in a feature article in April of 1998. And it described it as kind of like a oddly British hobby, a fun treasure hunt.

Travis: [unintelligible]

Teresa: [laughs] Yes.

Travis: "[exaggerated British accent] I'm the spokesman for letterboxing, Colin Firth. [goblin voice] I love letterboxing!"

Teresa: [laughs] You're gonna have to explain that. Uh, that... accent.

Travis: "Oh, Elizabeth!" [laughs]

Teresa: [snorts]

Travis: "Elizabeth, I love letterboxing your [unintelligible] moors!"

Teresa: Alright. Okay. Um, and so... before you could say "custom rubber stamp... "

Travis: "Custom rubber stamp!"

Teresa: Letterboxing in North America exploded. Um, using the internet, which was around in 1998 of course, um, people began becoming treasure hunters, and locating—connecting with each other, and hiding their own boxes, and, uh, this... through this effort was born Letterboxing North America in 2001, and over a thousand letterboxes dotted the US, covering all 50 states.

Travis: But, Teresa!

Teresa: Mm-hmm?

Travis: How do I play, and how do I play right?

Teresa: Well, here's something that you can do. You can go to Atlas Quest. It was started in 2004 by Ryan Carpenter, who created the website to—it's basically a virtual logbook to show off finds, and it's turned into message boards and stamp exchanges and a search engine where people can even find their closest letterboxing location.

Travis: Is it too late, Ryan, for you to change your name to, like, "[exaggerated British accent] Ignacious Riddlesmith!"

Teresa: [laughs] So, go to Atlas Quest online and you'll—you'll be able to find that. That'll be fun. Um—

Travis: But I don't wanna get in trouble, Teresa.

Teresa: Right. Obviously Atlasquest.com, they have a whole great list of etiquette's greatest hits listed here.

So, you should first, uh, gather your materials. Here are the things you'll need. A pen, a logbook, just to—

Travis: The courage to do what's necessary!

Teresa: —a small ink pad and a compass, and your own personalized stamp. Because—

Travis: And a saber to fight off the lions!

Teresa: [clears throat pointedly]

Travis: Oh, sorry. Mm-hmm, go on, mm-hmm?

Teresa: Because you will want to stamp your own little stamp on the letterbox's logbook, and then use the letterbox's stamp, right, on your logbook.

Travis: Yes, it's a stamp exchange is what we're looking for, yeah.

Teresa: Exchange, right. We're exchanging the stamps. Not the actual rubber stamps, but the—from the ink.

Travis: We got it, we got it. Yeah, go on. We're on it. We're pickin' it up.

Teresa: And you can make your own, uh, by carving out some rubber, and they even have kits for stamp making at your local hobby store, such as Michaels or whatever.

Travis: Little trick, if you just wanna try it out for the first time, potato.

Teresa: Potato, or a, uh... a cork, a wine bottle cork.

Travis: Mm-hmm, yes, yes, yes.

Teresa: Okay. Uh, then you can look up the clues in your area. And you'll definitely need clues 'cause, like we said, it's not like geocaching where you can use GPS on your phone. Um, you can't go out in the wild just expecting to find one somewhere.

Travis: Yeah, no, that's bonkers.

Teresa: Yeah, that—yeah. Um, and take a buddy. One, because, you know, it's more fun with two, but also, don't get lost in the woods.

Travis: Yeah. I mean, and in general, we've talked about woods stuff before. Let people know you're going.

Teresa: Yeah. [laughs]

Travis: Let people know where you're going, when you expect to be back, that kind of thing.

Teresa: All that stuff. Alright. Atlas Quest encourages you to follow the "leave no trace" principles. Uh, so don't mess up any of the wildlife or whatever where you're hunting. You could even pick up litter while you're there.

Travis: Yeah!

Teresa: Don't put yourself in any dangerous or harmful situations while you're letterboxing, and, like, just know, like, one of the rules, right? Is that a box will

never involve you, like... climbing up a mountain, or tearing apart a tree, or, like—that's just not—that's not how it works, right?

Travis: I would say in general it's probably the same kind of rules that apply to geocaching—

Teresa: Well—

Travis: —where if you look at something and you think, "Well, to get that I'd have to break that thing," then that's not it.

Teresa: I mean, I feel like we have gone through some pretty dense brush to find a geocache before.

Travis: Oh, sure, sure, sure. But I mean, like, there's been things where it's just like, "Well, to get that I'd have to do this super dangerous thing." And, like, that's probably not it.

Teresa: No, that's probably not it. Here is a very specific and important tip.

Travis: Don't murder!

Teresa: No—yes.

Travis: I mean—

Teresa: But let—

Travis: —we should include that more in all of our etiquette things.

Teresa: Letterboxing specifically.

Travis: Oh, okay.

Teresa: Um, it's all about the stamps, right? So if you are—if you're joining Atlas Quest, put up a spoiler alert, because if you're going to put, like, pictures of the stamps that you've found, the stamps that you've made, like, it's part of the treasure, right? Um, so don't accidentally take away the magic for someone else.

Travis: When you said it's about the stamps, uh, what popped in my head was, "It's about the cones," from, uh, *Parks and Rec*.

Teresa: Oh—

Travis: It's not important. But you forgot one thing. It's about the cones. It's not—okay, go on.

Teresa: [laughs] Also, Atlas Quest suggests that if you're planting a letterbox in an especially urban area, be very aware of your surroundings, because someone putting a tin box on the side of a building or hiding it in a bush real—really looks pretty sketchy.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Uh, and so, um, you know... it's kind of suspicious, and it might get you picked up by Homeland Security. So, like, don't—don't... do that.

Travis: Or a less case scenario, it might get your box thrown away.

Teresa: Oh, that's true. That's true. Um, always re-hide it in the exact place you found it. Don't hide it near anything historic. You know, we've talked about that, right? Because it almost disappeared forever because people were pulling apart old—old hedgerows or whatever.

Travis: Don't ruin—don't ruin it for other people. That's, like, a good rule in general. That and don't murder should be, like, two—don't ruin it for other people. Like, it is a shared experience, this thing. This is the magic of it. Let it—

Teresa: Well, it's a shared experience, but it's also a secret club, so don't go, like, asking random passersby for directions, right?

Travis: Right.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And don't murder.

Teresa: Don't murder. Don't take the stamp or the logbook with you when you leave, obviously.

Travis: Don't ruin it for other people.

Teresa: And so you are—this is the other thing. You are not to leave trinkets in the boxes.

Travis: This ain't geocaching.

Teresa: Exactly. Um, the letter, like—the letter phase of letterboxing is over. No trinkets, no letters or post cards, just take a stamp, leave a stamp. And unless there's, like, a travel thing—what did they call—what did we call it earlier?

Travis: Uh, hitchhiker.

Teresa: Hitchhiker. You could do that.

Travis: Alright, everybody. Thank you so much—

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: Thank you so much. Thank you again to Paul.

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: For suggesting this. This was very interesting. Neither one of us knew about it before we did it, and it was great.

Teresa: And thank you to Alex.

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: Did a deep dive on that Atlas Quest website, and go visit that if you're interested in letterboxing.

Travis: I also wanted to say another big thank you to Alex, because Alex has prepared a real bang up episode next week all about, hmm, idioms, our favorite thing to talk about. We're doing an idioms episode next week—

Teresa: For the first week of... the Max Fun Drive!

Travis: That's right, it's Max Fun Drive week one! We'll give you all the details later, but right now just know it's your chance to support the art and artists you love, including this show, and we're bringing out idioms 'cause it's our favorite thing to do, and we think it's your favorite thing to hear. And the pin for *Shmanners* is an idiom!

Teresa: Nice!

Travis: It's very cute. Um, so make sure you check that out. Don't miss it. Uh, let's see. Wanna say thank you to Maximum Fun for being our podcast home. Thank you to the other McElroys and the shows they do. You can check those out at mcelroy.family.

Um, thank you to everybody who supports us already on Max Fun!

Teresa: Yeah!

Travis: It means the world to us. We wouldn't be able to make this show without you. Let's see. What else, Teresa? What else do we say?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "brentalfloss" Black for writing our theme song, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also, thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. When we have topics that we invite our listeners to ask questions about—

Travis: Which I tried to do for this one! [laughs] But I don't think enough people knew about letterboxing.

Teresa: Yeah. Uh, you can tweet those questions at us @shmannerstcast. Um, also thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for the cover picture of our fan-run Facebook Group, *Shmanners Fanners*. Um, if you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans, go ahead and join that group.

Um, and thanks for everybody for sending in topics! We love it. Send in your topics, and your idioms, and all of that stuff, um, at—you can send it to our Gmail, shmannerstcast@gmail.com!

Travis: And that's gonna do it for us, so join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to *Shmanners*...

Teresa: Manners, *Shmanners*. Get it!

[theme music plays]

[chord]

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[relaxed music plays in background]

Speaker: Max Fun Drive's almost here! It starts on Monday, May 3rd, ends on May 14th, and it's the best time to support the shows you love. Here's some folks like you, sharing what Max Fun and our shows mean to them.

Caller 1: Most importantly, it's meant community.

Caller 2: And, uh, yeah! Just thanks for hanging out, making joke-em-ups, and making my week a little bit brighter.

Caller 3: So thanks, Maximum Fun, for making me a better person and making sure that I'm surrounded by better people.

Caller 4: Thanks again for all you do. I love supporting Max Fun, and, uh, keep it up!

Speaker: Come back Monday, May 3rd, for more details from your favorite hosts. We'll have some of the best episodes of the year, special Max Fun Drive thank-you gifts, and maybe a few surprises! That's Monday, May 3rd. Until then!