

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE IN JEOPARDY!

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By Carl A. Aveni II

It turns out that there's a lot of information out there in the world. Some of it is interesting, if not exactly useful (the English word "carnival" derives from the Latin roots "carne" and "vale"— meaning "farewell to meat"— originally referring to the final gluttonous blowout before Lent.) Some of it is random and disconnected. (Martin Van Buren was the only U.S. President to learn English as a second language). And it turns out that if you try to re-learn that little bit of cultural literacy you were taught in school, and show up to a *Jeopardy!* audition primed to give the names of King Lear's daughters, you will instead be asked a question about McLovin' from the movie *SuperBad*. Really. That's what happened.

It had not been my life's ambition to be on a game show. But when a friend mentioned in January 2010 that the *Jeopardy!* Online tests were being held that night, I signed up. I'd tried out once before, and harbored no illusions that this was the beginning of anything big. The test is offered once per year: 50 questions, 15 seconds apiece, and it is a truly humbling experience. The questions cover the typical array of cultural literacy topics, but are much, much harder than what you'll usually see on the show. The only question I remember was "Name the 15th Century English author of *Le Morte D'Arthur*." You might be thinking "Sir Thomas Malory." Personally, I was thinking "how could anyone possibly come up with that in 15 seconds? Suffice it to say that I had no idea. In any event, if you answer 35 questions correctly, you get an e-mail scheduling an in-person audition at one of four testing sites across the country.

Much to my astonishment, I got just such an e-mail in early February, imperiously telling me that I had 48 hours to confirm that I would be in Boston on April 6, 2010. Turns out this was entirely non-negotiable. I called the producers, and asked whether I might audition on one of the other dates, in whatever city was convenient for them. I earnestly explained that April 6 is my wife's birthday, and I was supposed to be in the middle of a long-planned Florida vacation. They very helpfully informed me that if I couldn't audition at the specified time and place, I could always try out again next year. So Boston it was.

There were 60 of us participating in that day's Boston audition. But first, we stood around in the hallway sizing each other up. There were a couple of retired college professors, a few little old ladies, and sweaty young guys frantically cramming the names of Holy Roman Emperors. Then the head games began. Some older guy came up to me, pointed to a nervous twenty-something, and said – "he's so young he probably doesn't remember Nixon's Vice President." That

really happened. I was tempted to say – "Nixon had two – which one do you remember?" Instead, I muttered hateful things under my breath, and moved away.

Once inside, the producers explained that there are 400 contestant slots per year. If we did well enough at the audition (whatever that meant), we'd be put in a pool of 1600 candidates for 18 months, from which we could be drawn and put in one of those slots. No guarantees, and we'd have no idea how we did until the moment we got the call – if we got the call. They had us take another 50 question test, this time with eight seconds per question. Then we role-played as if we were on the show. That was followed up by some light banter, to get a sense of the personalities in the room. And frankly, this last bit was where people really fell apart. Lots of mumbling into shoes about baseball card collections, and who won a junior high school spelling bee. We were each asked what we would do with the money if we got on the show and won big. I said I'd buy my wife a nice birthday present, since I'm missing her big day (cue the string section, and smile gently at heartless producers).

At the end of the audition, the producers told me that I was in the final candidate pool. If I got the call, it would be at some point between June 30, 2010 and December 31, 2011. But the odds were still greatest that I'd never hear from them again. Nevertheless, it was time to get serious and hit the books.

Over the course of the next nine months, I went to a lot of different sources. For reference books, I read just about all of the *New York Times Guide to Essential Knowledge*, *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *Myths: Tales of the Greek and Roman Gods*, a heavy, nasty thing called *501 Great Writers*, a quirky and wonderful book called *Schott's Miscellany*, my daughter's *World Atlas*, Bill Bryson's *A Short History of Everything* and, until I got bored and quit, about half of the red leather covered 1972 children's edition *Encyclopedia Britannica* (I think I made it through "H").

I also watched perhaps a hundred video documentaries: Ken Burns's series on The Civil War, Jazz, and Baseball, a PBS series on the Bible, a bunch of biblical biographies, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the History of the Crusades, a biography of Beethoven, another on Huey Long, some educational videos on science and the history of science, and lots, lots more. The BBC did an incredible series of all of Shakespeare's plays. I made it a goal to watch all of them. I ultimately missed *Measure for Measure*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Cymbeline*. In the car, the Teaching Company's audio lectures were great company. Science in the Age of Enlightenment, Old Testament, New Testament, British Literature,

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American Writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, to name a few. At one point, I had the jarring experience of going directly from the “History of the Papacy” to the “History of the Broadway Musical.” Trust me when I say you want to keep those topics separate in your mind.

I should add that this was no longer really about being on a game show. I knew that, in the unlikely event I ever got called, chances were slim that my particular studies would be relevant to the topics on that day’s show. There’s simply too much out there in the world to know. But it was fun to re-hydrate my knowledge base, and while, for example, Superstring Theory is unlikely game show fodder, it turned out to be both interesting and more than a bit kooky. I also came to understand that, no matter how hard I try, I will simply never remember for more than an hour at a time which Bronte sister wrote *Wuthering Heights*, and which wrote *Jane Eyre*. And I guess I’m ok with that.

Much to my surprise, I got the call in mid-January, and three weeks later, I found myself in sunny southern California. They tape ten episodes over a two-day block twice per month. There’s a 15 minute break between each taping, for the host and returning champion to change clothes and maintain the innocuous fiction that a day had just passed. So Alex Trebek works a total of four days a month. Nice gig.

I should also add that they tape *Wheel of Fortune* on alternating days, in the next studio, using the same tech crew. The contestants on both shows stay at the same hotel. And I’ll just say it – the *Wheel of Fortune* contestants were a WHOLE lot more fun to talk to in the bar, and seemed to more fully appreciate the absurdity of their endeavor. By contrast, several of the *Jeopardy!* contestants treated their final preparations with a solemnity usually reserved for matters of national security.

Jangled nerves aside, however, the final contestants on the show, to a person, were interesting, studious, decent and supportive. There were none of the head games I’d seen in the Boston audition. In talking, we discovered that most of us had gravitated to the same four or five basic resources, and all had gone through a similarly transformative study experience. We may have been a group of nerds – but we were a communal group of nerds, and that actually was really nice.

What was going to separate us, one from the next, ultimately would be luck and timing more than knowledge base. And don’t forget the buzzer. The stories about the buzzer, by the way, are all true. It is an object to be hated and feared. Ring in before Alex finishes his question and you are locked out. Ring in too late, and someone else gets there first. There’s a guy on the set whose job it is to flip a switch the moment he subjectively thinks Alex is done with the last syllable of the question. That switch activates a light, which activates the buzzers – but if you wait for the light, most of the time, you’ll be a millisecond too late. You’re not really racing the other contestants, timing the light, or even timing Alex himself. You’re actually timing the reflexes of the subjective switch-flipper, and how in the world can you prepare for that?

Even so, luck was still the biggest factor in determining final outcomes. Although I’d watched the show plenty of times, I’d never really appreciated how much plain old luck changed outcomes behind the scenes. Before I was randomly placed on a panel, I saw two of the stronger competitors in our group knock each other out of the running. On different matchups, either might have gone on for several days as returning champion. They just knew the same stuff, were of about the same speed, and split the categories in

their comfort zone – allowing the third contestant to sweep ahead. Besides the random fortunes of the match-ups and the categories themselves, some were also luckier than others in finding Daily Doubles, or hitting Final Jeopardy questions that they actually knew something about. But, frankly, that’s how it should be. In the end, it’s a game, not a civil service exam.

I couldn’t actually say how I did on the show until it aired (May 26). The non-disclosure agreement is pretty clear on that point. But however it all turned out, the real reward came early – in the months of preparation before I ever got the call, as I rediscovered my intellectual curiosity. Oh, and Emily Bronte wrote *Wuthering Heights*. I just looked it up. Again.



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