

Puzzle Books

by Rik van Grol

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, when the first COVID19 lockdown in the Netherlands was lifted and shopping was allowed again, I went to Amsterdam to visit antique shops to hunt for puzzles. I found several puzzles I knew were there and considered too pricy/not interesting enough, but I also stumbled onto two small puzzle books. One was incomplete, but was easily restored, the other was fine. More importantly, they have a locking mechanism I had not seen before. I have several puzzle books and for me this made me cross the point to allow me to say that I own a collection of puzzle books. So, I thought this was also a good moment to say something about them.

So, puzzle books are the subject of this paper. If, for some reason, you were thinking about collections of books about puzzles, then I have to disappoint you. In this paper I am presenting a collection of mechanical puzzles that look like books.

I define a puzzle book as a secret opening box in the shape of a book. Puzzle books have the size of a regular book, but that is not mandatory. Most puzzle books could not really hide in a bookcase; they would stand out. There are some “book-safes” that can actually hide very well and are intended to do so, but those are not puzzles. That puzzle books stand out is mostly due to the fact that they generally are made of wood.

I intended to write this article for the postponed G4G14 in April 2021, but it was postponed two more times. In the meantime, I have been collecting more puzzle books. And on the way to G4G14 I visited the Lilly Library in Bloomington (IN) to look at the puzzle books in the Slocum Collection. In this article I am presenting 14 puzzle books in my possession that differ by their locking mechanism and/or their country of origin. Figure 1 shows the row of puzzle books presented. One puzzle is not included here because it would not fit (number 3). That —knowing one is not included— the number is bigger than 14 is because I have several copies of some puzzle books. Those copies look different but have the same origin/locking mechanism.



Figure 1. Puzzle books presented in this paper, showing the range of sizes



Puzzle books from Hungary

If you visit Budapest, the capital of Hungary, and you wander into the Great Market Hall it is hard not to stumble on the first puzzle book presented here, see Figure 2. Also in souvenir shops throughout Budapest it is impossible for a puzzle collector not to notice these puzzles (unless you are fully focused on the other well-known puzzle from Budapest, a Sorrento-type puzzle box, which is even more dominantly available in all sorts and sizes). This puzzle book has a simple well-known opening, which is discussed in a book by Jack Botermans and Jerry Slocum [1]. The opening is in the spine of the book and can easily be recognized by a skew cut through the spine, see Figure 2. This lock is well-known, so I do not feel I give away anything.



Figure 2. Hungarian puzzle book and its locking mechanism (left & middle), and concealing the skew cut in the spine by smart decoration (right)

Note that these puzzle books are not really sold as puzzles, but more as souvenirs. You can get this puzzle in many different designs – some traditional, others beautifully decorated. In some puzzles the lock is better concealed than others. In one of the books the skew cut in the spine is concealed by a skew carving pattern on the spine, see Figure 2 right. This type of puzzle book was the first I purchased, several decades ago. At later visits to Budapest I purchased additional copies, see Figure 3. These puzzles have the size of a small pocket book (Height ~13 cm, Depth ~10 cm, Thickness ~3 cm).



Figure 3. Range of typical Hungarian puzzle books



During a recent visit to Budapest [2] I found a puzzle book with a slightly different locking mechanism. The lock is simpler, probably because the puzzle is smaller and the original locking mechanism would be too big. The size is odd and small (HDT 9×8×2.5 cm), see Figure 4.



During the same visit to Budapest I went to the Ecsery Street Market (a large permanent flea market) and I found an antique puzzle which I previously had only seen in a book by Jerry Slocum and Jack Botermans [3], see Figure 4. It is a stack of two wooden books on top of a base. There is a hidden compartment in each of the books, and a third compartment in the base. This antique puzzle is beautifully made with inlaid wooden decorations and finished with French polish. The base is 35×28 cm, the height is 12 cm.



Figure 4 Small Hungarian puzzle book (left) and puzzle-book-stack (right)

Puzzle books from Sri Lanka

I have never visited Sri Lanka, but I managed to get several of their puzzle books. It is easy to recognize puzzle books from Sri Lanka. They are hand-carved and depict one or more elephants on the front and generally a woman's face on the back, see figures 5 and 6.



The first type has one big compartment that opens at the front of the book (unlike the Hungarian book that opened at the spine). The locking mechanism is simple, see Figure 6 middle. I found two copies of this puzzle in second hand stores in the Netherlands.



The second type has four small compartments that all open from the front (Figure 6 right). The locking mechanism is the same as with the first type. This puzzle I purchased from Frans de Vreugd who visited Sri Lanka together with Peter Hajek [4] in 2012.



Figure 5



Figure 6. Books from Sri Lanka; simple (left/middle), more complex (right)

Antique puzzle books from eBay

With my interest in puzzle books I searched eBay for antique puzzle books. There is enough to be found, but it is not always easy to find samples that are reasonably priced and that you actually manage to purchase. Perseverance and some luck is required. Over the past few years I purchased three antique puzzle books.



The first is a puzzle book that, as a puzzle, resembles the Sri Lanka puzzles, in that the front of the book slides off. It has a nice inlay on the front, see Figure 7. This book, however, is not professionally made. It is cut roughly and the way it is manufactured is amateuristic. Due to some design choices its solution is not immediately obvious, so it is still a nice sample. The origin is probably England. The puzzle has pocket book size (HDT 16×12×3.5 cm).



Figure 7. A simple puzzle book with inlays, probably made by an amateur



The second puzzle book is a professionally made puzzle. It does not show any inlays or pretty decorations, but it perfectly conceals its solution, see Figure 8 left. Apart from its weight (light) it feels like a solid piece of wood. If you would hide something fairly heavy you might actually get away with it. This is a simple but very good puzzle book. The origin is probably England. The puzzle has pocket book size (HDT 16×12×3.5 cm).



The third puzzle book is a small Anglo-Indian puzzle book, made from teak wood with brass inlays, see Figure 8 right. As a puzzle it is extremely simple, if you know the solution... The solution is well-hidden; another example of a simple but good puzzle book. The size is that of a small pocket book (HDT 12×9×3.5 cm).



Figure 8. Two books with a well-hidden lock; English (left) and Indian (right)



Antique puzzle book from The Netherlands

This is the puzzle I found in Amsterdam in an antique shop with which I started this paper, see Figure 9 left. I got two identical copies. They are very small (HDT 8×5×2 cm). Interestingly the locking mechanism is one that I did not see before. As with most puzzle books, the locking mechanism is not difficult, but well-hidden.



Figure 9. The smallest puzzle book I own is from Amsterdam (left), the biggest from France (middle), and the thickest from Cyprus (right)



Antique puzzle book from France

Searching the internet I also found a puzzle book in France. This is the biggest I have seen so far (HDT 31.5×22.5×5 cm). The lock is simple and easily spotted. The book has a beautiful inlay of a village scene, see Figure 9 middle.



Puzzle book from Cyprus

Most puzzle books presented so far are old or traditional. The puzzle book I found online from Cyprus is a more modern puzzle book. The locking mechanism is a combination of known locking mechanisms. The puzzle is quite large and meant to store a bible (HDT 25.5×18.5×7 cm), see Figure 9 right.

Puzzle books from the International Puzzle Parties

Two of the puzzle boxes are Exchange puzzles for the International Puzzle Parties.



The first puzzle book is not meant to be a puzzle book. It is a storage box for a puzzle. It resembles a book, and is therefore included here. This puzzle is the Exchange puzzle from George Bell in 2015 at IPP35 in Ottawa, see Figure 10.

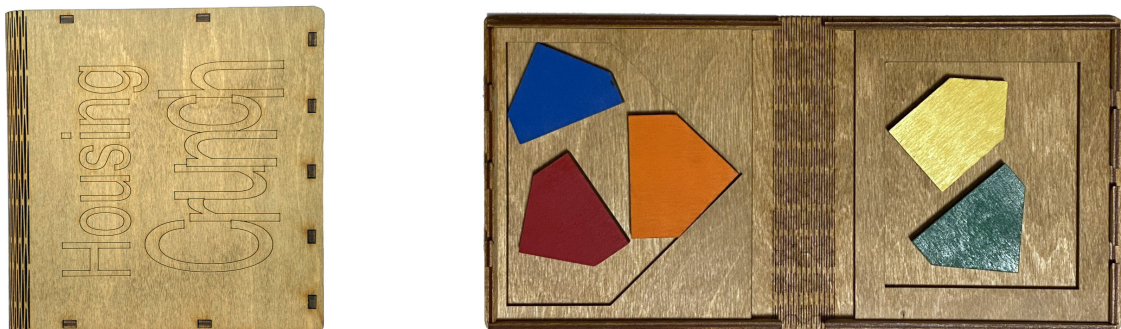


Figure 9. IPP35 Exchange puzzle from George Bell, closed and open

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The second puzzle book is more a puzzle than a puzzle book. It looks like a book but is a sequential discovery box. After opening the book, which requires the largest number of steps of all presented puzzle books, there is a small storage area which contains a small puzzle. The book is designed by Louis Coolen and Adin Townsend, and exchanged at IPP34 in London in 2014 by Allard Walker, see Figure 10.



Figure 10. IPP34 Exchange puzzle from Allard Walker (left), book in puzzle lock from Robert Yarger (right)

Puzzle book from USA

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Puzzle book number 14 is not a puzzle box that looks like a book, but an actual book that is locked by a puzzle, see Figure 10. The book is a book by Robert Yarger about his puzzles [5], STICKMAN Milestone Puzzle Book.

Design features of a good puzzle book

A good puzzle book is a good puzzle. The locking mechanism may be simple, as long as the lock is well-hidden. The next requirement would be to look like a real book. This would mean that the pages should look like pages as much as possible. The ultimate puzzle book might have a leather or cloth spine or even a complete cover so that it could be hidden on a bookshelf. A simple solution in order to hide a puzzle book amongst normal books might be to give the book a dust jacket.

There is much more out there

In this paper 14 puzzle books were shown. But there is much more out there. Most presented puzzle books are traditional and/or antique. I visited the Slocum Collection to see if I had missed obvious examples of puzzle books. This is not the case. The most important puzzle book not presented is the puzzle book from Akio Kamei. This puzzle book is well made, but quite traditional. It has a simple, not particularly well-hidden solution.

In recent times puzzle books with new and more difficult locking mechanisms have been developed. Some new puzzle books can be found on <https://www.Etsy.com>, and in books on puzzles.

Puzzle books in literature

To find puzzle books in literature is not easy. Before recently, at most one or two puzzle books would be shown in only a handful of books, mostly by Jerry Slocum

and Jack Botermans, see the references. Some puzzle books are documented in over 30 years of the Dutch puzzle magazine CFF. Recently a book about puzzle boxes has been published by Peter Hajek [6]. In this book quite a few puzzle books are discussed and presented. Also some recent puzzle books are documented in this book. It was published while this article was being written: amongst other puzzle boxes it shows more puzzle books than presented in this article and previously in other books.

For publications from the Dutch Cube Club, Cubism for Fun (CFF), see the website: <http://cff.helm.lu>.

References

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