

Words for Jean-Jacques

Jean-Jacques Laffont was my friend. We first met 32 years ago when we were grad students together. On an occasion like this, it's impossible for me to express all that he means to me. So let me just tell you about a small incident that occurred when my wife Gayle and I were visiting J-J and Colette during their summer vacation at Lacanau. This would have been sometime in the early 80's.

Jean-Jacques had decided that after dinner we were going to play the word game "Scrabble." This is a game in which you try to make words by placing tiles with letters on a playing board. But in his typical imaginative and exuberant fashion, this wasn't going to be ordinary Scrabble; it was *bilingual*—any word in English or French was allowable.

Well, at one point I decided to add a Q and a U to an E already on the board to make the word "que." Not very exciting. But in Scrabble, playing a Q is worth 10 points, so it wasn't such a bad move. And after all, it was a *French* word.

Next, it was Colette's turn, and she did something extremely clever. She wanted to make use of the Q that I had played but she didn't have any U's. Now, in English, a Q in any word must be followed by a U. But in French there's actually a word with a Q and *no* U: "coq." And that's what she played, which was greeted by an enthusiastic round of applause from the rest of us.

But then it was Jean-Jacques' turn. I could tell he was up to something tricky because he had this devilish glint in his eye. And indeed, I was right. With great panache, he proceeded to lay down all 7 tiles from his rack—giving him a huge bonus—M, A, G, N, I, F, I. This plus my own pathetic little que spelled “magnifique.”

Well, we had to stop playing at that point. How could we possibly continue after such a stroke of brilliance? But looking back on this episode, I can't help thinking how fitting it was that the game ended this way. Because that's just the right word for Jean-Jacques - -magnifique.

Eric Maskin