

GET THE FUCK OUTTA HERE

Escape rooms are a choose-your-own-adventure book come to life

BY ALEX V. CIPOLLE

ZOMBIE ROOM AT DARE

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

On a misty October afternoon, six of us — adults ages 27 to 45 — stand in a strip mall parking lot, high-fiving, wiping sweat from our brows and giggling, rowdy from the silliness and mental acrobatics of the past few hours. We stroll over to nearby Dizzy Dean's Donuts to reward and replenish ourselves with sticky treats for unraveling an ancient Egyptian mystery and surviving a bloodthirsty zombie attack.

I mean, come on folks, how much do *you* accomplish in a workday?

Late that morning, our ragtag *Eugene Weekly* staff arrived at a nondescript storefront in a strip mall on West 11th, its windows cloaked in opaque white curtains and a decal on the glass that says “DARE: Escape and Adventure Rooms.”

Owner Michelle Dee, bedressed in Beetlejuice stripes, ushers us in with a big grin on her face, locks the door — the first of several doors that would lock us in that day — and pulls the curtains shut.

Escape rooms (also known as adventure rooms) are a relatively new phenomena, with the first ones opening in Japan around 2010; the idea caught on and spread like wildfire across China and Europe, and then to the U.S. According to financial news site *MarketWatch*, Beijing has the most escape rooms of any city, with 182 as of 2015. In the U.S., Los Angeles and New York City have the most with 23 and 21 respectively.

A cursory search shows more than a dozen in Portland. Currently, there are two companies that run escape rooms in Eugene — DARE and Trapdoor Puzzle and Escape Rooms at 4th and Charnelton, and one in Corvallis (Escape Corvallis).

Despite their international popularity, you may still be scratching your head, as I was until recently, at what, exactly, an escape room is.

Scoff rudely at anyone who tells you it's a team-building exercise. While correct in a sense, that is perhaps the most banal, fun-killing way to describe an escape room — this ain't some dry corporate ice-breaker.

These interactive, themed rooms are filled with creepy clues, codes to crack, locked treasures and secrets: so many secrets. In order to “escape,” groups of two to six must collaborate and solve a myriad of puzzles within a time limit — typically 90 minutes.

And no cell phones allowed, cheater.

Dee opened DARE Aug. 12 on W. 11th, and business has been steady and building since.

Dee herself fell in love with escape rooms about a year ago after visiting her daughter in Manitou Springs, Colorado, where they decided to give this novelty game a shot.

“We were just blown away with how much fun it was,” Dee recalls. “After that I started looking at everything like it was a puzzle.”

She decided: “I have to do this. This is my calling.”

Dee revels in the theatrics of it all, a charmingly cryptic and cheeky host. She's also an avid antiquer and thrifter, collecting treasures and trinkets to create the ambiance and puzzles of DARE's Explorer Room and Zombie Room.

Gathered in the lobby, she weaves a tale about a 20th-century explorer who needs our help to solve a King Tut-tian conundrum, effectively dismantling our disbelief. We eat it up, throwing ourselves into the pulpy mystery.

“The room is incredibly deceiving and time is fleeting,” she warns us.

After guiding us down a dark corridor, Dee leads us one at a time by the hand — eyes closed — into a dark room and swiftly locks the door behind us.

Here we are, six adults in the dark and the chaos and fun begins. We spend the next hour deciphering antique maps, fumbling with codexes and solving riddles wrapped in mysteries inside enigmas.

Dee's role is not finished either. She monitors our stumbling progress via spy camera, and over a small speaker hidden in an antique telephone, she feeds us mischievous little clues to nudge us along when we hit a dead end.

I humbly admit this happened quite a bit. It's not that the puzzles are overly difficult or esoteric — they're just right and the rooms are “family-friendly” — but when the

adrenaline kicks in and the clock is ticking, well, you're just not as clever as you like to think. Teamwork is key because it takes all sorts of brains to escape.

And we did. But that was only the half of it. Next up was the Zombie Room, which could also be called the creepy carnival clusterfuck.

Before entering, Dee herds us back together in the lobby, describing the nefarious ringmaster that runs the room. “He's a cheat,” she cautions.

Jumping up and down in all sincerity, my 45-year-old coworker yelps: “I'm really scared.”

I think we all are, fun-scared, like the feeling you get when you pop in your favorite horror flick.

The Zombie Room is a whole nother can of worms, with sinister twinkly lights, menacing carnival music and, of course, a pseudo-slumbering zombie that adds panic to puzzle-solving. A few of us jump, or run, startled. I shriek a couple times, but then again, I'm prone to shrieking.

And that's where I'll stop. No spoilers here. We leave Dee's place grinning like idiots, tighter knit, puffed up like proud birds who found all the birdseed.

A week later, we are still recapping the experience, and I call Dee. I want to know, what is it about escape rooms that is so magnetic, so satisfying?

“I think it fulfills an actual interaction and communication with other people,” she says. Dee explains that she's a big fan of video games, but the world of screens we live in can be isolating.

“It's a great way to make it real life,” she adds. “I feel that most people want this type of little mystery in their life.”

Dee and her son are already considering opening a second location with a nautical theme, and Dee would like to expand the “escape room” model to walking neighborhood mystery tours.

“It's just so much fun,” she says.

Amen.

DARE rooms run \$25-\$30 per person, but group rates and specials are available; reservations required. Recommended for ages 15 and up. Visit dareescaperooms.com or call 541-409-8894. Trapdoor hosts a “Mystic Lair” room; \$30 per person, but group rates and specials are available; reservations required. Visit trapdooreugene.com for details.