INDEXERS IN FICTION

Second in our series of fictional accounts of practitioners of our profession, is this somewhat alarming extract from *Cat's cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut (Michael Joseph, 1963), quoted here by kind permission of the author:

*Chapter 55: Never index your own book*

As for the life of *Aamons, Mona*, the index itself gave a jangling, surrealistic picture of the many conflicting forces that had been brought to bear on her and of her dismayed reactions to them.

'Aamons, Mona', the index said, 'adopted by Monzano in order to boost Monzano's popularity, 194-199, 216n; childhood in compound of House of Hope and Mercy, 63-81; childhood romance with P. Castle, 72f; death of father, 89ff; death of mother, 92f; embarrassed by role as national erotic symbol, 80, 95, 166n., 209, 247n., 400-406, 566n., 678; engaged to P. Castle, 193; essential naiveté, 67-71, 80, 95f, 116n., 209, 274n., 400-406, 566n., 678; lives with Bokonon, 92-98, 196-197; poems about, 2n., 26, 114, 119, 311, 316, 477n., 501, 657f., 555n., 689, 718ff, 799ff, 800n., 841, 846ff, 908n., 971, 974; poems by, 89, 92, 193; returns to Monzano, 199; returns to Bokonon, 197; runs away from Bokonon, 199; runs away from Monzano, 197; tries to make self ugly in order to stop being erotic symbol to islanders, 80, 95f, 116n., 209, 247n., 400-406, 566n., 678; tutored by Bokonon, 63-80; writes letter to United Nations, 200; xylophone virtuoso, 71'.

I showed this index entry to the Mintons, asking them if they didn't think it was an enchanting biography in itself, a biography of a reluctant goddess of love. I got an unexpectedly expert answer, as one does in life sometimes; it appeared that Claire Minton, in her time, had been a professional indexer. I had never heard of such a professional before.

She told me she had put her husband through college years before with her earnings as an indexer, that the earnings had been good, and that few people could index well.

She said that indexing was a thing that only the most amateurish author undertook to do for his own book. I asked her what she thought of Philip Castle's job.

'Flattering to the author, insulting to the reader,' she said. 'In a hyphenated word,' she observed, with the shrewd amiability of an expert, "self-indulgent". I'm always embarrassed when I see an index an author has made of his own work.'

'Embarrassed?'

'It's a revealing thing, an author's index of his own work,' she informed me. 'It's a shameless exhibition—to the trained eye.'

'She can read character from an index,' said her husband.

'Oh?' I said. 'What can you tell about Philip Castle?' She smiled faintly. 'Things I'd better not tell strangers.'

'Sorry.'

'He's obviously in love with this Mona Aamons Monzano,' she said.

'That's true of every man in San Lorenzo I gather.'

'He has mixed feelings about his father,' she said.

'That's true of every man on earth.' Iegged her on gently.

'He's insecure.'

'What mortal isn't?' I demanded. I didn't know it then, but that was a very Bokonist thing to demand.

'He'll never marry her.'

'Why not?'

'I've said all I'm going to say,' she said.

'I'm gratified to meet an indexer who respects the privacy of others.'

'Never index your own book,' she stated.

A *duprass*, Bokonon tells us, is a valuable instrument for gaining and developing, in the privacy of an interminable love affair, insights that are queer but true. The Mintons' cunning exploration of indexes was surely a case in point. A *duprass*, Bokonon tells us, is also a sweetly conceited establishment. The Mintons' establishment was no exception.

Some time later, Ambassador Minton and I met in the aisle of the airplane, away from his wife, and he showed that it was important to him that I respect what his wife could find out from indexes.

'You know why Castle will never marry the girl, even though he loves her, even though she loves him, even though they grew up together?' he whispered.

'No, sir, I don't.'

'Because he's a homosexual,' whispered Minton. 'She can tell that from an index, too.'