INDEXERS IN FICTION

Third in our series is a daunting example, father of the perfection of butlers, from *Jeeves: a gentleman's personal gentleman* by C. Northcote Parkinson (Macdonald and Jane's Publishers Ltd, 1979), quoted by kind permission of the author:

The Rev. Theophilus Jeeves . . . pinned all his hopes on Basil, who took no fewer than three prizes for scripture at Hogsmonter Grammar School. Nor was Theophilus initially disappointed, for young Basil went on to obtain a scholarship to Oriel College, Oxford, where he presently graduated with honours. Somewhat to his father's dismay, however, the young man declined to take holy orders and proposed rather to remain at Oxford as a lecturer in philology.

It should be explained at this point that a philologist is a student of language. Unlike many of his rivals in this subject, Basil devoted more attention to letters than to words, his first public lecture purporting to reveal, for the first time, the true origin of the letter P. His theory was well received but his academic future plainly depended upon its eagerly awaited sequel: a study (naturally) of the letter Q. Were that greeted with similar acclaim, he would undoubtedly obtain a fellowship at his own college. All depended, in short, on the success of his second appearance before the Philological Society. The assembled scholars all knew (as we all know, do we not?) that the Phoenicians had a sign, an emphatic voiceless velar, from which the Greeks derived their letter goppa. After using this for a few centuries the Greeks realized that this letter, even when voiced, could serve no purpose whatever since it merely duplicated the sound of their letter kappa or K. So they cleverly sold this redundant sign to the Romans who were too stupid to reject it. All this is common knowledge, but who first thought of improving the Q by the addition after it of U? Here was the problem which Basil set out to solve. Had he solved it? We shall never know. Not surprisingly nervous when the crucial day came, Basil accepted from his friends the stimulants which should have screwed up his courage to the sticking point. His had, however, been an abstemious life and what they gave him proved more, far more, than enough. He approached the rostrum in an alcoholic haze, shouted some nonsense about minding his p's and q's and ended prostrate on the floor. A believer, it would seem, in doing the job thoroughly, he shortly afterwards married Daisy Wiggins, the popular barmaid of the Cow and Crescent. He thus put a final period to what might have been a distinguished career. . . .

For the rest of his life Basil was to make a scanty living as a proof-reader and index-compiler. We may picture him as eccentric, shabby, learned and normally drunk. One thing he always retained, however, would seem to have been a magnificent and pedantic command of the English language. When relatively sober, at least, his periods were rounded, his syntax perfect, his vocabulary extensive and his *mots supremely justes* . . . Reginald . . . owed his upbringing to his father. If Reginald went to school there is no record of it. We must rather suppose that life with Basil Jeeves, as he swayed over his proof sheets, was an education in itself.

**The dustier fringes**

It is interesting to note from the dust-jacket of Barbara Pym's novel *No fond return of love* (Cape 1961, reissued 1979) that the heroine 'chose the rather unusual course of attending a learned conference for those on the dustier fringes of the academic world who compile indexes and bibliographies'.

However, the story does have a happy ending—it is in this unlikely environment that the heroine (an indexer) finds true romance.

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We are pleased to see that Kurt Vonnegut has included in his new novel, *Jailbird* (Cape 1979, £5.50) an index; 4 pages, names only.

Space and time for indexing

Not all authors are careless of the value of an index to their books. In a review recommending Norman Knight's *Indexing, the art of*, in *The Author* 90 (4) 1979, 196, writers are warned that 'many publishers allow not only insufficient time but insufficient space' and they are advised 'to insist on a specific number of pages to be reserved for the index when making contractual arrangements with the publisher after the acceptance of the manuscript'.

There are some who index rather than write, not because they cannot write but because they have nothing new to add. Or if they did write, they fear that nobody would believe them.