

Compiling *Cumulated fiction index* 1975-1979

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My approach to this work is very similar to that of its originator, Alan Glencross. My work even started in a similar way, with a casual approach from the publications officer of the Association of Assistant Librarians.

I studied the earlier volumes, had a brief chat with Antony Gordon (son of SI Chairman John Gordon), who had compiled the previous cumulation, relieved him of several trays of cards containing subject headings, references and other necessary items for the would-be indexer, and, with some trepidation, embarked on my first year's work. Rightly or wrongly, I decided to do it my own way, and to add, amend, and alter headings as I saw fit.

There is no magic formula: each book must be considered separately. Generally I consider them under the following headings:

First, *genre*. For example, thrillers; family stories; historical novels; science fiction; with all their attendant subdivisions. Thrillers are particularly interesting, since new types occur all the time. Political thrillers are a new concept, as are books about terrorist groups, and impending disasters brought about by man. Science fiction is also developing more specific themes than it had a few years ago.

Next, *subject*. I try to be as specific as possible, and to create new headings as ideas for novels arise out of current affairs and news items. The number of these is surprising; there has, for example, been a spate of novels about terrorism, oil rigs, hijacking, nuclear power stations, and biogenics, all subjects well to the fore in news bulletins over the last few years. There are more and more novels with sex as their main pre-occupation, and I had great fun trying to find suitably descriptive headings without lapsing into Anglo-Saxon! I finally settled upon 'Amatory Exploits' for 'catalogues' of explicit bedroom scenes loosely linked by a rather thin plot, and 'Erotic Novels' for those (comparatively few) apparently written simply to titillate the reader. I suppose I must also have indexed books con-

cerned with almost every sexual perversion known—it broadened my education considerably. I make copious cross-references to related subjects, and from the specific to the general.

Third, *period and location*. Most novels are set in a fairly narrow period, but some need more than one chronological entry. Others, particularly family sagas, span almost a whole century, and can have only a general heading. The 20th century is divided into pre-war and post-war periods, and, since 1945, has tended to be split into 15-year chunks; though perhaps 1975-84 might be an appropriate future heading.

Geographical locations are relatively easy to pinpoint, though 'Middle East' and 'Africa' tend to figure largely as locations for novels with somewhat vague or mythical settings. Again, many books are set in more than one country or town, and require geographical headings accordingly. There is a constant need to look out for changing names, in Third World countries especially, and to change the relevant heading and make the appropriate cross-reference. Locations in American thrillers are sometimes difficult to identify, and I need to scan them closely to try to find some reference to the name of the state, at least. I never index books simply under the name of the country in which they are set if it is possible to find a more specific location.

Last, and by far the most difficult, is *form*. First-person stories, short stories, and anthologies are easy enough to identify, but it is the 'literary' or 'avant-garde' novels which present problems. I'm not sure who created the headings 'Stream of consciousness' and 'Interior monologues'—I suppose it was Alan Glencross. I find these difficult to distinguish, and usually guess, occasionally varying them with 'Abstract Novels' or 'Surrealist Novels' for the really incomprehensible ones.

Most reviewers of *Fiction index* have expressed doubts about the value of 'First-person stories' and 'Single-day stories' as headings. I have never personally been asked by a library user for a book whose action takes place within twenty-four hours, but I have been

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told several times by borrowers 'I don't like books written in the first person'.

The compilation of *Fiction index* is done from a set of approval copies provided weekly by one of the large library suppliers, with a matching set of printed 5" x 3" slips, four for each title. I check the reprints with the previous volumes in the *Fiction index* series, to see whether they have already been indexed (a useful exercise, incidentally, as a comparison of what I think the subject should be, and what previous compilers thought; it quite often turns out to be a guessing game on my part).

I sort the new titles into categories; 'Romances' and 'Westerns' are rarely assigned subjects, unless they seem to have some unusual feature or setting. Short stories and anthologies are self-explanatory, and need additional headings only if they fall into a particular category, such as science fiction. Then I look in detail at the rest of the books, and assign appropriate headings. The average number of headings per book is about four, but some books need as many as six or seven, others are quite adequately covered by two. The slips are sorted and filed behind very general guide cards in catalogue drawers. I try to file each week's slips promptly, but I admit that at times a couple of months' material may still await filing.

At the beginning of the year I begin to prepare the material for the printer. Careful checking of all headings is necessary, and some must be changed to conform with those used in previous years. Then the whole year's output is filed behind subject cards, and all the references are checked and interfiled. Biographical and historical details are rechecked, and the appropriate cross-references and 'see also' references are made. Fortunately my printers are happy to work from 5" x 3" slips, so no typing of manuscripts is required.

After the type has been set and I have checked the proofs against the original slips, I interfile the slips with those used in previous volumes. This ultimately provides the material for the five-year cumulation. I aim to get the slips to the printer in mid-February, for publication in late April.

The cumulated volume, of course, takes much more time. There is even more checking of headings and references, and a good deal of tidying up to be done. Decisions must be made at this stage about whether to change an entire heading for something more up to date, or to reassess some of the previous years' material in the light of new subjects.

My chief problem is finding subject headings for many of the modern classic novels. Authors such as Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble and J. I. M. Stewart tend to write novels about ordinary relationships between people, not concerned with family or sex. These are extremely difficult to classify, and up to now I haven't

thought of a generic term for them. Thrillers, too, are becoming very complex, with several sub-plots, and the difficulty here is deciding into which of the dozen or so categories of thriller they fit. All this can be very time-consuming, and quite often I have to read the whole novel to get the sense of it. Fortunately I spent several years as a cataloguer, which trained me both to read quickly and to pick out the salient features of a book fairly easily.

Finally, a word about the tools of the trade. A good up-to-date atlas and good one-volume biographical dictionary are essentials. I use whatever atlas is most recently revised, and *Chambers's biographical dictionary*. I quite often refer to *Brewer's dictionary of phrase and fable*, and consult the *Dictionary of national biography* for the more obscure historical characters. I rely a good deal on publishers' catalogues, the *Book-seller*, and reviews in the press, for help with the 'unclassifiable' stuff.

It's a fascinating job, indexing fiction, and the fact that I now find it impossible to read anything at all without mentally assigning subject headings to it is a small price to pay for the pleasure it gives me.

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Discussion

John Gordon pointed out that the *Fiction Index* is in fact limited to hardback books, and excludes paperbacks; but this fact is nowhere stated in the volume itself.

Mandy Hicken agreed that this is a major omission, and that little feedback is received from librarians and readers as to how useful the volume is found to be. She told questioners that she reads—or skims through—about ten books a week for the index, varying with the time of year; sometimes as many as 50-60; and agreed that it is difficult to distinguish between thrillers/detective stories/spy stories/suspense stories. Books have to be returned to the library approval service as soon as the compiler has finished with them. There is a swiftly growing number of books to be included; Mills and Boon, for example, now produce 20 new titles each month.

Junior fiction is listed in a separate index; some titles appear in both, for example those of Andre Norton, C. S. Lewis.

The print order for the *Fiction Index* is 3000, of which about two-thirds are sold, some to replace worn-out copies. The volume is not much reviewed, but such critics as do refer to it are fairly kind. It is hoped that any prejudices evident in the index reflect the attitudes and vocabulary of the times rather than bias on the part of the compiler.