believe, good for us, to boot—though distractions which prevent concentration may have their hateful aspect. And why should ‘intellectual labour’ need ‘compensating for’? Does Mr Johnson find reviewing books so dehumanizing?

As for indexing not being ‘creative’; well, yes, there are rules, systems and conventions to follow, and practice and application may make most of our work more of a skill or a craft than an art, if we have fairly well-stocked, orderly minds to begin with. But there is surely in a good index, however simple, an extra process: a balancing of analysis and synthesis, of reason and imagination; a drawing-in of the author’s mind as revealed in his written words, and a reshaping in our own minds to make a retrieval-tool through which the author’s thoughts may be made accessible to the composite mind of the reader as we intuitively conceive it, which can only be ‘creative’. Even those of us still struggling at the apprenticeship of our trade may pursue this as an ideal. Moreover, we must be humble—we are only to serve the book, and perhaps Apollo on our better days. For me all this adds up to art rather than mechanics, if only at rare moments of tricky decision and happy insight.

If any reader feels this is balderdash, he/she, and Mr Johnson perhaps, may take comfort from the old Latin author who wrote (I quote from memory) that the musician does not create, since his work is directed by the composer’s score; the composer does not create, since his work is directed by his muse; but the critic, directed by neither muse nor score—he creates. Perhaps we may be allowed to rank with the critics, at least?

As most of the terms we are using are incapable of strict definition, we might go on arguing about this for ever . . . Why not?

Judy Batchelor, London, W7

INDEXERS IN FICTION

This, the ninth excerpt in our series, is from a BBC television drama series of 1979, ‘Accident’, written by Ray Jenkins. In the following passage (reprinted by permission of the producer, Joe Waters), Stephen Mitchell is a graduate student, and Albert Ramsey his university tutor. The brief description of the requirements for indexing seems full of insight.

RAMSEY: Poverty is one of the necessary concomitants of a student’s life.
MITCH: Well, I don’t like it.
RAMSEY: No? You’d sooner be getting a hundred pounds a week working on a conveyor belt, would you? Or perhaps you could go down the mines or into the steelworks like most of my family have done. Or even, like you say, teaching kids or writing insidious muck for an advertising agency. Better life, that?
MITCH: Be a better life for Diana—and the—baby.
RAMSEY: Will it? She’s going to thank you a lot, isn’t she, when you tie that load of guilt round her neck? ‘Look at the future he gave up for me and the kid.’
MITCH: Some future.
RAMSEY: Oh, I dunno, you’ll be quite promising material when we get the straws out of your hair. Ever done any indexing, have you?
RAMSEY: It’s a job that demands enormous powers of concentration and a superhuman ability to discard the irrelevant. Wonderful training for the mind. It pays peanuts of course, but you won’t need that much extra to support one small baby. There you are. (Handing him a card.) I’ll tell him you’re coming over. He’s been on to me for weeks about it.

MITCH: But, would he trust me—I mean—he’s the authority on the nineteenth century, isn’t he?
RAMSEY: He thinks he is. I am really—and I trust you.
MITCH: I’ll think about it.
RAMSEY: You will do it, Stephen. And you’ll also make sure that it doesn’t interfere with your work. O.K?
MITCH: Thanks, Albert.
RAMSEY: All in the service.

Indexers beware!

A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.—Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Self-reliance’.


The indexer has to be an artist, to exercise judgement with words. The thrill in indexing, greater even than the moment when the first run of slipmaking is finished, lies in the editorial control one exercises, the thinking about what is now going to happen, if you make it. The indexer becomes creator as well as a long-distance runner.