Publishers on indexing

Ann Edwards

The Indexer 14 (2) Oct. 1984, 85–7, had a symposium of authors' attitudes to indexes. For this, we wrote to nine authors asking them to tell us of their attitude to the indexes provided for their own books by another person. All the authors replied, fully and frankly.

For this October 1985 issue we decided to have a similar survey of the attitudes of publishers to indexes. A letter asking eight separate questions was sent to 32 UK publishers. Seven replied; the following article is based on those replies. Our sincere thanks to the seven goodly publishers, who, we feel, should remain anonymous.

‘But English people won’t fill up questionnaires,’ said Harriet.

‘Won’t fill up questionnaires?’ cried Miss Schuster-Slatt, taken aback.

‘No,’ said Harriet, ‘they won’t. As a nation we are not questionnaire-conscious.’

Nothing much has changed in the fifty years since Miss Sayers wrote those words: the average questionnaire-despatcher can still look forward to a very meagre harvest. And we all do it. A letter arrives soliciting our opinions on some matter we may be deemed to know about; we glance through it, decide that however much we would like to, we really haven’t the time; and into the bin it goes. This happens even when the questionnaire is the sort that asks you to tick the best answer from several. When we receive a letter full of questions, requiring us to compose a letter in reply, the chances of our actually doing so get even smaller.

It is not, then, really surprising that when the Society of Indexers wrote a fairly lengthy letter to publishers about their practices vis à vis our trade, the majority did not manage to reply. Had we sent a checklist with answers to tick off, we might have got a few more answers—but inevitably not very enlightening ones. Since we sent a letter, the replies were fewer but more interesting. One can only thank the 20% of those canvassed who did provide answers, many of them very full and detailed. Nevertheless the first conclusion one might draw is either that publishers are very busy people (true enough in my experience) or that they are not all that fascinated by indexes and indexers (which is probably paranoid on our part).

From the publishers who did reply, a variety of patterns and practices emerges. Some companies clearly believe that all, or nearly all, non-fiction books require an index, while others tend to see indexes as mainly for serious books—not needed in light reading or in those books whose arrangement makes an index a refinement. The decision is usually made by the editor but the author is often consulted. At least one firm is guided by the book's designer. Index length seems to depend on several factors, although the more academic the publisher the more flexibility there is likely to be. Nobody was prepared to say in as many words that they work out the number of blank pages on the last signature and announce that as the proper length for the index. Which is odd, since I have always found this to be the most common criterion. It might indeed be interesting to know how many books are published without an index because the last signature happened to be full.

Generally speaking, and with some exceptions, the author is expected either to provide or to pay for the index. Most publishers are happy to let him do his own or find his own indexer (as often as not a near relative). This can, in many editors' view, produce a good—indeed the best—index. Some publishers, especially academic ones, normally prefer the index to be the author's own work. The argument is that his own knowledge of his intentions leads to an index which reflects those intentions by concentrating on the concepts that he regards as important. The outsider, however professional, is felt not always to have that kind of insight. I believe that this attitude is mistaken, but one must add that sometimes one has heard indexers say that they never read the whole book before they start work. In such cases the publisher probably has a point.

When an author does not do his own index, the indexer is often the husband, wife, best friend or mother-in-law. Desk editors sometimes compile indexes for their authors, but others do seek out a professional. A specialist knowledge of the subject is by no means always required. (Having indexed a university textbook in a subject in which I don't have an O level, I think I already knew that.)

Indexers Available* is quite often consulted (although one publisher said she would use it if only she could get hold of a copy!) but far more usual was for the editor to approach someone she already knew, or someone recommended by a friend. It remains true for the ambitious

indexer that your time is best spent in getting to know people. Publishing is a small world based on personal contact far more than on formal qualifications.

How long will a firm give you to complete your index? Well, if you are lucky you might get four weeks, or you might get one week. Publishers would love to give you longer but schedules, printers, etc., etc. make it impossible—and you are not exactly first in the pecking order.

For similar reasons, your index is unlikely to get a thorough inspection when you have done it. A few—generally academic—editors will check it carefully, revise it if necessary, and send you their comments. More commonly, the editor will give it a fairly cursory check—perhaps a 10% sample for accuracy—and send it to the author for his comments. Occasionally the editor will delete index entries if they strike her as irrelevant. If the author really hates your work a last-minute, panic-stations attempt at alteration and revision may be made. You are, it seems, not likely to learn of this except through the fact of not being used again by that editor. I think I should stress, though, that this is not discourtesy or casualness on the publisher’s part; once more pressure of time is the most important factor.

In the book, you may be acknowledged but probably won’t. Sometimes the reasons are technical. The relevant page may be set before the indexer is chosen, for example. Sometimes it is simply not company policy, which you may interpret as ‘we don’t but I don’t know why not’. Sometimes it isn’t actually company policy not to credit an indexer, but it just doesn’t seem to happen. The more difficult the index, the more likely a credit is. And, credited or not, you can consider yourself unlucky if they don’t send you a copy.

The snippets of reviews concerned with indexes that The Indexer publishes seem not to be a matter of great interest to most publishers. If I can let my prejudices show, I do wonder actually whom they are of interest to. If the review is a major one, those concerned with the book will have read it already. If it isn’t, then a bare sentence such as ‘for a book this size the index is inadequate’ tells you nothing. It may be (a) from a eulogy whose author is looking for something to criticize in the interests of balance or (b) from a fanatical onslaught on the book determined to knock everything but the chorus girls’ knees or (c) an ignorant aside based on no more than a casual flick through or (d) true. Without the rest of the review one can’t tell. One publisher did write on this point. He pointed out that The Indexer had published only a sentence or two of adverse comment about one of his books, when the book had been very well received by almost all, was very favourably reviewed by most, and only attacked in one carping and unfair notice from which we had taken our extract. He felt that this was doing him and his book a disservice, and I tend to agree.

Finally, publishers were asked what the Society could do to help. The answer seems to be ‘not a lot’. The publishers were generally complimentary and full of exhortations to keep up the good work and provide more publicity. A few suggestions were made—guides for indexers, advice to publishers on indexing, things of that sort—but the overall tone was of polite satisfaction.

‘Now isn’t that just like your British reticence,’ exclaimed Miss Schuster-Slatt.

(The quotations at the beginning and end of this article are from Gaudy Night by Dorothy L. Sayers (Gollancz). The remark about chorus girls’ knees refers to a notorious review of a 30s musical, which ended: ‘I have knocked everything but the chorus girls’ knees, and there Nature anticipated me.’)

Ann Edwards is a former freelance indexer/editor now working in a public relations consultancy.

Pas de data

After he had written his major history of The Royal Ballet, Nigel Gosling (who together with his wife Maude Lloyd wrote under the pseudonym Alexander Bland) talked to the London Ballet Circle on the problems of all the research. ‘It took a hell of a lot of digging into,’ he said, and remarked that it would have been especially helpful if there had been a complete index of Dance and Dancers. ‘Would someone help compile one—it would certainly be a mammoth task?’

That was in 1981. Nigel Gosling is, alas, no longer with us: and there is still no D & D index. A quick check with the editor, John Percival, and his calculator, revealed that this is actually the 398th issue, so the task is now gargantuan. But if someone with knowledge of the work involved, and a bountiful heart, would be prepared to set it up a lot of people would be delighted. I understand incidentally, that in the days when she made ballet films for BBC Television, Margaret Dale had her own private index. If true, this could perhaps be used as a basis from which to work.

—from Dance and Dancers, April 1984