Sisterly indexing

The author as indexer is a common theme in this journal, and we have frequently enjoyed reading of the torments of authors engaged in stealing our bread (or, as they would have it, trying to salvage a few crumbs from their own loaf). Dale Spender, whose celebrated *Man made language* challenged conventional perceptions of the way we use words, turned her attention to man-made indexes when she undertook the indexing of her own *Women of ideas*. In this extract from *Scribbling sisters*, quoted here by permission, she writes of the pleasures and frustrations of selecting appropriate index headings. (*Scribbling sisters*, by the way, is a compilation of letters exchanged between Dale Spender and her sister Lynne Spender during 1984. Anyone wanting to enjoy the experience of having two stimulating correspondents without the attendant horror of having to reply in kind is urged to treat herself to a copy [Camden Press, 1986, ISBN 0 948491 00 0, £4.95].)

The real intellectual challenge in my life at the moment is the index for *Women of Ideas*. It was one thing to recognise that conventional indexes make women's experience and priorities invisible, but quite another to work out a new conceptualisation. I've been getting barmy just trying to work out what the categories for the index could be, and haven't even begun to match categories with page numbers. I don't think I can begin to explain what a mammoth job it is and while there is an enormous amount of fun in it, at times (as I think up ways of naming from women's perspective) it is wearying work. Anne is helping me do it. I sit and read out categories to her from every page and she keeps index cards . . . which periodically we have to reshuffle. So far we have been through 800 of the bloody things (index cards) and the physical task itself is almost unmanageable. But do we have some superb categories.

We have put in the entry 'loving husbands' and along with it, 'Radical men' and then listed Bertrand Russell and John Stuart Mill for example, and have also cross-referenced them with 'champions of women's rights'. The male heroes of the women's movement are certainly going to be seen in a different light.

We have had to invent names . . . like, for example, historically one of the issues women have protested against most vigorously is the arrogant male presumption that a woman isn't complete without a man. It is a basic thesis of Cicely Hamilton's book (*Marriage as a Trade*) and yet, in 'standard' terms, there would be no way of entering that particular concept in the index. So we now have 'Completion complex, that is, the in-completeness of a woman without a man' and the references then are to the ridiculous nature of such a concept.

One big entry will be 'Disagreeable women' and of course it will contain references to most of my favourites . . . who were all thoroughly disagreeable (on the grounds that if you were going to be condemned anyway, if you were wrong before you began, then you may as well enjoy what you were doing and really make men uncomfortable). By far the biggest entry though, is 'Harassment'—as far as I can determine at this stage, there must be a reference on every page . . . maybe the book should have just been called 'Harassment'. Not a jazzy enough title though, is it!

We have fiddled with some of the patriarchal assumptions—the heading 'Economics' is immediately followed by 'Female, (sexual economics)' and contains the subheadings 'Failure to get a man, lucky to get a man, trading one's person (marriage and prostitution)'. The final sub-heading is 'Economics, male'. How do you like that? Women will not have seen their view of the world displayed so explicitly before and I hope it gives validation to women's experience. Anne and I have enjoyed ourselves when we have been able to forget the hard work . . . both of us get backache and eye strain. It has been a scintillating consciousness-raising experience for me and an exercise in what it could be like if women were declaring what was important and what was not.

Obviously, it isn't perfect, but it is a start and it is a practical way of saying that we don't have to accept the classification system that men have devised. The only trouble is that having started on this train of thought, I am likely to continue to devise new categories . . . long after the index has been typeset, and I suppose for the next few months (anyway), I'll keep thinking of what I should have put in, but didn't think of at the time. Have you got any suggestions for entries?

(And just for the record, I discovered some mistakes that I had made in the book when I had to proof read it, so I added another entry 'mistakes, author's' . . . don't suppose that one has featured too prominently before). Maybe I kid myself . . . it's quite possible that the index might not even be consulted . . . by women readers or reviewers. I can imagine a few reviewers though who would go bonkers . . . I have deliberately refrained from indexing any men who are mentioned in the text on the grounds that what is good for the gander is good for the goose . . . how many indexes in books written by men make women invisible?

Lynne Spender replies:

Your index for *Women of ideas* sounds marvellous and without having ever named it as a particular activity, it is sort of what I tried to do with the index for *Intruders*. Now that I see it as a conscious effort to re-conceptualise 'Knowledge', I wish I could re-do the index.