Authors and indexes

May I enter a tiny demurrer to Mr. John Vickers' comprehensive demolition of a dreadful index, published in your April 1987 issue under the heading 'Index, how not to?'

Mr. Vickers rightly castigates the hopelessly inadequate indexer and—again rightly—lays the principal blame on the publishers. But he entirely absolves his friend, the author of the maltreated book.

That won't quite do. He says that the author 'got no sight of the index until he saw it in all its full horror in the printed volume'. Why not? Why didn't he insist, and go on insisting, that it should be submitted to him before it was printed? Why do such authors supinely allow their publishers to behave like that? As my readers know (to say nothing of yours), my own beloved indexer is without fault or flaw, yet I go through her work with a powerful magnifying-glass, and she is plainly glad that I do.

This authorial willingness to be left out of the picture is widespread; I cannot count the number of fellow-authors who have complained in my hearing about, say, a rotten jacket for their books. When I ask why they did not demand, and go on insisting, that the jacket be submitted to them before it was printed? Why do such authors supinely allow their publishers to behave like that? As my readers know (to say nothing of yours), my own beloved indexer is without fault or flaw, yet I go through her work with a powerful magnifying-glass, and she is plainly glad that I do.

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Incidentally, I have found that the more involvement I demand in the publication of my books, the more my publishers like it.

Bernard Levin

Authors as indexers

In John Vickers' article 'Index, how not to' (The Indexer 15 (3), 163–6), which is a criticism of an unsatisfactory index, he writes: 'It may well be true in general that the author should be the last person to index his own book, being too close to the text'. I hold this statement to be untrue. The reason given for upholding it—that the author is too close to the text—is a curious one, for the article repeatedly points out as a fault in the index under discussion that it attends too exclusively to the words of the text rather than to the ideas behind it. Of these ideas the author would have been naturally and fully aware; practically all the errors complained of would not have been made had the author indexed the book.

While perhaps not going as far as the (Irish?) wit who is reported as saying that whoever writes a book, the author should index it, I think the advantages of author-indexing might be better recognized.

It must be freely admitted that even single-author books cannot all be indexed by their authors. An author may lack aptitude, inclination, or opportunity; but given these, and the necessary arrangement with the publisher to allow time at the page-proof stage for indexing as well as proof-reading, the author has a built-in superiority over all other indexers in understanding of the book. He should not be deterred by the acknowledged fact that some author-indexers have produced very peculiar and not very useful indexes. He need not do likewise.

An author wishing to make an index without previous experience should of course master the few necessary rules by study of a reputable text on the subject.* Having done this preliminary homework, which need not take long, let him set boldly forth, consulting his handbook when in doubt or difficulty.

Hugh Brogan in 'The Agony and the Ecstasy of a DIY author-indexer' (The Indexer 14 (3), 175–6), makes much of his sufferings, and of his vow never to make an index again, but he admits to his delight in finding that the index was 'coming out a thing of beauty', and his 'intense aesthetic satisfaction'. This pleasure in the results of index-making is not often mentioned, but it is very real for the experienced indexer (though not necessarily with every index). Here we have it strongly felt by a novice. The hesitant author should think of this, and forget the tales about the 'drudgery' of indexing.

Statements by professional indexers about author-indexers like the one by John Vickers quoted above are unfortunate. For one thing, they might be taken as motivated by self-interest. For another, it should be remembered that author-indexers have carried off several Wheatley medals, a testimony to their capabilities. Indexers might also ask themselves: if I wrote a book,

*He must beware of false guides, such as those described by Elizabeth Wallis in 'Every author his own indexer' (The Indexer 13(4), 248), by Hazel Bell in 'D-I-Y indexing' (13(3), 123), and Daniel Uchitelli in 'The index and the indexer in "How to write a book" books' (14(2), 103–4).
should I like someone else to index it? They should not discourage a would-be author-indexer. An indexer has to begin somewhere, and where better than with his own book? Even if an author has had books indexed for him, this need not continue. An author for whom I had indexed three books proceeded to index his subsequent books himself, no doubt having looked at my indexes enough to see how it was done, and decided that he could do it better.

Our distinguished first President, G. V. Carey, wrote in his Making an Index: almost any book could be indexed more effectively and with less trouble by its author than by anybody else.

M. D. Anderson
Cambridge

A note on the use of passim

Although the use of passim is 'not recommended' in BS 3700, it seems to me to perform a necessary function where a topic is being described and compared with a number of others over a sequence of pages. A case in point was a passage on alphabetization, where general problems of alphabetical arrangement were mentioned together with the solutions offered by four different codes. To make an index entry under the name of each code and give inclusive pagination for the whole passage suggests a sustained discussion of the item; to give staccato page locations for every mention suggests recur rent reference; to concoct an entry indicating comparison with the three other codes produces a clumsy, and still incomplete, entry; to use passim implies that the item is treated throughout the sequence, but not exclusively nor in isolation.

Mary Piggott
Wembley

Faster than a speeding index

Sometimes there are good reasons . . .

I was rash enough to mention at an SI meeting that a book entitled Our common future—the final report of the World Commission on Environment and Development about the future of the world, no less—had been published in that very week by Oxford University Press Paperbacks without an index: a 400-page United Nations-initiated international report on saving our planet, warning the world of the consequences of haphazard growth in industrial development, dangers to the sea, the air and the atmosphere itself. There would be no easy access or means of recalling the edicts of the learned group chaired by the Prime Minister of Norway, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland.

I should have known better as the editor of The Indexer never lets an opportunity pass when she smells a good story. Pressed by her to find out more, I rang the managing editor of Oxford Paperbacks, Thomas Webster, who was frankness itself about the omission. He was not in the least bit apologetic; in fact, after he'd told me why there was no index to such an important book, I ended up by congratulating him.

He told me the writing of the report was completed, in Norway, on 10 February 1987. It was revised on a word processor and the discs were flown to London on 10 March. These discs were put through the Oxford Test System, which is a multi-disc reader producing camera-ready copy. The book was completed and ready for distribution on 6 April—three weeks before the world launch by the Norwegian Prime Minister in London on 27 April.

Thomas Webster had every date etched in his memory when he recounted this amazing streamlined production, a process normally taking six months. He said a whole department worked round the clock, seven days a week for three weeks to accomplish the impossible.

The best news of all for indexers is that the second printing contained an index. Sarah Matthews of Woodstock was given three weeks to produce one for this momentous book.

Elizabeth Wallis
Richmond, London

□ 'In a world where available information is doubling every five years, what but the index can save us from chaos? . . .

The whole idea of indexing is to put the labor of a discriminating intelligence between ourselves and the information contained in the book.'


Obituary

Kenneth Boodson

Ken Boodson, who was awarded the 1973 Wheatley Medal for his excellent index to his own outstanding Non-ferrous metals: a bibliographical guide, published by Maconald in 1972, died on 5 April 1987 following a heart attack. He was 71 years of age.

As Librarian of ICI Metals Ltd (later IMI Ltd), Ken played an active part in Library Association activities in the West Midlands when I was a young librarian, and I found him an inspiration. He will be sadly missed.

K. G. B. Bakewell