Indexes to works of fiction: the views of producers and users on the need for them

Philip Bradley

Over many years there have been occasional items in The Indexer on the question of whether fiction needs to be indexed. An attempt is made here to bring together the views of authors, publishers, reviewers, readers, literary societies and indexers in order to see what the various groups of fiction users think of the matter.

Introduction

Many of us have sometimes wished to recall a passage we have read in a book only to find that we must search for it long and hard, perhaps in vain. A book with no index can be very frustrating. A reader making a serious study of a work may make notes of items either on the flyleaf or on a loose sheet of paper. These methods have their drawbacks—books are damaged, slips lost, and the reader loses the thread of what he is reading. This lack of an index applies to some extent to non-fiction works, but in the case of fiction the provision of an index is so unusual that although one may bemoan the fact one is not surprised by it. We may sometimes wonder why this is so and perhaps ask ourselves if the reasons for indexing non-fiction books are not also valid in the case of fiction.

The subject of indexing fiction has been mentioned on a number of occasions in the pages of The Indexer where the provision of an index has been supported by some eminent contributors. Others in the world of books feel just as strongly that it is unnecessary. This article discusses the opinions of various groups of people involved with fiction: authors, publishers, reviewers, readers, literary societies and indexers. Finally an examination is made of some novels that have actually been indexed. Quite a large number of people in each group were contacted although, inevitably, some did not respond. A very few who did reply either had no views at all or were too busy to give any.

In addition to the usual functions of an index of helping to make the contents of the book accessible, some do even more. Some indexes augment the information given in the text by adding such facts as family relationships and dates which may not be given in the text, or if they are may not be easy to locate. The usefulness of such information is mentioned in a recent British Standard on indexing.1 An example is to be found in Vincent Brome's J. B. Priestley (Hamish Hamilton, 1988) in which the maiden name—Hopkins—of Priestley's wife Jacquetta Hawkes is given in the index although it does not appear in the text.

One purpose of an index could scarcely have been considered by anyone except an indexer, and that is to look upon it as a work of art. Professor Heckscher writes:

... I prefer the Index which has a life of its own, which may pride itself on being the child of imagination, and which should enable us to spend a peaceful evening in bed, reading such an Index, as if we were reading a good novel (The Indexer 13 (1) April 1982, 25).

Some consider that an index makes the prospective reader lazy, claiming that he will use it as a short cut and read simply the part which interests him instead of the whole work—'... an index is a convenience for the lazy reader who doesn't want to become familiar with the whole book.'2 This turning to the index before examining the text probably applies mostly to works in which the reader has a personal interest. In the case of biographical works, for example, some readers may turn to the index not so much from laziness as apprehension. A reader who suspects his name is mentioned in the text may clearly wish to find out as quickly as possible, and the more eminent members of society are just as prone to this as others. A recent article stated that Sir Robin Day, on seeing Ludovic Kennedy's autobiography On my way to the club (Collins, 1989) did what one might have expected: 'Naturally, the first thing he did was to look himself up in the index.'3 This use of an index is perfectly legitimate—if an index is regarded as a short cut to finding a piece of information, then it may be used to check one's entry in a biography as much as to check any other fact.

However, to prevent an apprehensive reader from finding out quickly if he is mentioned in the book it has been known for an index to be deliberately omitted. Nicholas Fairbairn explains the lack of an index to his book Life is too short: autobiography, vol. I (Quartet Books, 1987), by saying:
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The men, in their vanity, would have turned only to the index, hoping that their names would be in it, and the women, in their terror, would have turned to it hoping that theirs would not!

The MP's vanity appears as pronounced as he assumes that of his characters to be.

Even Lord Byron mentioned a reason for not having an index. In Don Juan, 1, 44 he notes that 'learned men' removed from the text of the classics the 'grosser parts' and relegated them to an appendix. Readers would turn to this and the publisher would therefore be saved 'the trouble of an index'.

Indexing fiction—general

If it were possible to come to the subject of indexing with no knowledge of books and their purpose one might suppose that the provision of indexes to fiction would depend on the same reasoning as that for non-fiction and that both classes of book would be equally provided with them. This, however, is not the case, and although there is some support for indexing fiction there are also many people who do not like the idea. While some of those opposed to it simply regard it as unnecessary, others go further and consider it to be positively detrimental to the aims of fiction as an imaginative, creative genre. Perhaps this attitude is entrenched because of the longstanding tradition—going back for the three hundred years or so since fiction as we know it became a literary form in Britain—that indexes to fiction are simply not provided. However, it is interesting to see that even those opposed to it in general sometimes make an exception in the case of particular types of fiction such as reprints of classical novels.

When we consider the purpose of an index there may well be good reasons for having one in some kinds of fiction, but, as in the case of non-fiction, certainly not all. Although the arguments put forward here relate to back-of-the-book indexes, including indexes to multi-volume works, another group of works should also be kept in mind as they contain some of the characteristics of an index. This group consists of separately published indexes, perhaps published after the author's death, to a series of books or a disparate group of books written by a single author; or indexes to literary groups of books. Such groups may be extended to include other kinds of work such as handbooks and dictionaries which are in some ways an extension of a conventional index.

It is interesting to look at a random collection of recent fiction to see what proportion of books have actually been indexed. Very few examples may be found. If one examines the British national bibliography, which since the late 1960s has included the presence of an index in the bibliographical details of the books it lists, few books in the section on fiction texts are shown with one. Indeed, so few novels are indexed that some people say they do not consciously recall ever seeing one. Certainly they are sufficiently unusual for The Indexer to draw attention to them when they are noticed. A check on a large number of nineteenth-century novels covering many well known writers and also many who are now unknown except perhaps to students revealed only one indexed novelist—Sir Walter Scott. Of novels which have been indexed a noticeable feature is that they are frequently reprints of classics originally published without one. This is not always the case, however.

Of the tremendous amount of fiction published in the English-speaking world only a very small part would benefit from an index. Clearly not all is worth indexing, any more than all non-fiction is, and contributors to The Indexer make this distinction clear. Light fiction of an ephemeral nature intended to be read purely for recreational purposes or simply to pass the time, although it has an important place in the life of the reading public, would certainly not require one. What can usefully be indexed are the more serious works of fiction, both classical and modern.

A practical suggestion as to what kinds of fiction might usefully be indexed is that put forward by Lilian Rubin (The Indexer 7 (4) Autumn 1971, 203) in which she suggests the following categories as suitable:

1. Classics (in editions prepared with a large student market in view) which have a very considerable number of characters, e.g. Tolstoy's War and peace.
2. Novels with a large 'cult' readership, e.g. Tolkien's Lord of the rings.
3. Novels with a serious and detailed historical framework, where the author provides scholarly references, e.g. Mary Renault's Last of the wine.

An earlier contributor, in a letter signed J.M.S., had already suggested the first of these categories. '... all modern editions of classical novels, of whatever period,' says the correspondent, 'should have an index, especially as so many are required reading in academic courses'. (6 (2) Autumn 1968, 73). In addition, Knight and Cullison have made suggestions along the same lines (see below). These kinds of fiction seem to be the sort in which an index would be useful to a reader. When a novel becomes part of an academic course of study the requirements of a reader may become the same as those of a reader of non-fiction.

Indexing fiction—views of authors, reviewers, readers and publishers

There had been suggestions that some fiction would benefit from the presence of an index long before this was advocated in The Indexer, which began publication in 1958. In fact the case in favour goes back at least to the eighteenth century. Dr Johnson, who had an opinion on most matters, showed an interest in this one. His views have been mentioned several times in The Indexer. For instance, they were summarized by L. F. Powell in a letter (3 (2) Autumn 1962, 69) stating that at the request
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of Johnson, Samuel Richardson compiled an 'index Rerum' to the 3rd edition of Clarissa (1751) and later published a separate 'General Index both of Maxims and Reflections' for Pamela, Clarissa and Sir Charles Grandison. Powell also points out that 80% of the illustrative quotations from Clarissa in Dr Johnson's Dictionary came from the index and not from the novel itself (an interesting use for an index, and perhaps an example of a reader using the index instead of the text). It is such philosophical reflections and views of abstract matters in fiction that some readers may find useful.

In 1921 another literary man had written:

There is no greater literary sin than the omission of an Index, and, if I had my way, even novels would be provided with charts of this kind to their multifarious contents. (E. B. Osborn: Literature and Life)

Clearly some writers, not themselves involved in indexing, consider an index to fiction to be important.

However, the groups of people involved in the use of fiction who are considered here (authors, publishers, reviewers, readers, literary societies and indexers) are more recent. All those consulted who had occasion to mention indexes to non-fiction books agreed that they are important, but in the case of works of fiction views are more varied. Authors, publishers, reviewers and readers are in general not in favour of them; indexers support them more but by no means universally, while literary societies, rather surprisingly, are just as keen, perhaps even more so, than indexers.

The views of authors, reviewers and readers are given together because the categories overlap (authors may also be reviewers and both are readers) and they hold, to a large degree, the same views. Many consider that indexes to fiction are unwanted, unnecessary, would serve no useful purpose, would detract from the true purpose of the novel and would consequently be a waste of money. Among comments on the subject some were very brief, not to say acid; others were more reasoned; while some were detailed and included views on the purpose of the novel. The number given after each author mentioned below is the number of titles by him/her listed in a recent edition of British books in print. These are not necessarily all fiction, but show the scale of normal human experience. This is helped by not having extraneous matter such as an index. The presence of the paraphernalia of index, notes and bibliography, or even just one of these, implies through custom that the book is a book of fact. An example of what this can mean, at least for a bookseller, and no doubt also for many readers, may be seen in the case of Orlando (see section on modern English works below). Furthermore, in addition to not providing an index, many modern novels do not provide a contents list or chapter titles either. As works of non-fiction usually do have one or more of these this lack further emphasizes the fictional nature of novels. However, not all writers view the idea as bad. Bernard Levin (9), although better known in the literary world in fields other than fiction, says, 'I have always been in favour of this move [i.e., indexing fiction] and am amazed that nobody has ever taken it up.'

A point made by several authors and other groups is the usefulness of a list of characters in long novels such as those by Dickens, Thackeray and some Russian authors. Page numbers would not be necessary, simply the names of the characters and their relationship to one another. This would also be useful in the case of books with characters having unusual names such as Silmarillion (J. R. R. Tolkien) and Maia (Richard Adams). Both of these have such a list, and in the case of Maia the suggestion for it came from the publisher.

What happens, though, if a novel in due course

I think that indexing fiction would be a terrible idea. Fiction is there to free us from the tyranny of our own perceptions, to take us to another world where, for a time, the concerns of our everyday lives are suspended. If readers love a passage within a work, or are struck by it, they will make their own notes. Students and sub-academics should not be encouraged to imagine that a work can be defined or even understood simply by the topics it contains. No. We need what magic remains in this little life. Let's not nail it down only to find it has disappeared. Think of all those fairy stories where a greedy or stupid man tries to imprison a sprite or a genii or to contain a stash of goblin treasure. In the morning nothing is left but the container.

These are but some of the authors who gave their views and one must have sympathy with them as practising novelists, although Ms Winterson apparently regards indexers as a sub-academic species. They consider that insofar as novels contain purely fictional matter, they are intended to detach their readers from reality. Readers want to read a story purely as a story and should not be surprised if it contains material which is or can be outside the range of normal human experience. This is helped by not having extraneous matter such as an index. The usefulness of a list of characters in long novels such as these has such a list, and in the case of Maia the suggestion for it came from the publisher.

What happens, though, if a novel in due course

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becomes an examination textbook and requires dissection so that it may more easily be examined in detail? In effect the user’s requirements may then be the same as those of a user of non-fiction books. Should he have to suffer deprivation because custom prevails? Should the general reader be put first? Should the novel retain its usual format and thus have no index? This question of the use of novels for study purposes was in fact mentioned by several people, some of whom considered that in such cases an index would be permissible. The practical need for an index overcame the usual feeling that a novel ought not to have one. This view, however, was not always shared even by those whom one might expect to support it. One university lecturer in English literature considered that having an index even to serious classical fiction would give students the wrong attitude to it. The provision of indexes to individual works, besides being a departure from what is normally supplied, would somehow make students regard fiction as something different from what it actually is. Even when a novel is studied as a serious work of art one must not lose sight of its fictional character. In fact, not having an index is an essential feature of the novel. Its unity must not be disturbed by the presence of an extraneous item such as an index. In addition there is the possibility that students would tend to read parts of the book and not the whole. This is of course already the case with non-fiction works but is more acceptable there because, whereas non-fiction is expected to be used to some extent to locate individual items, a novel is intended to be read as a complete work.

Among general readers at various levels few have ever thought of a novel as the kind of book which needs an index, probably because one reads them from cover to cover and under normal circumstances one does not need to pick out particular points. They read novels for pleasure, often in a fairly short time, have no need to refer back to the text, and may then dispose of them. Readers form by far the largest group of people involved in the world of books and as long as they show no desire to have indexes there will be none.

Publishers were almost unanimously opposed to the idea partly because they considered fiction indexes unnecessary, but principally on the ground of cost. This is the case in Britain and the USA, and publishers estimate that the consequent increase in the price of a volume could be as much as £2.50. Several correspondents from the other groups, especially literary societies, also suggested that cost was a factor in their argument. If a demand arose and readers were prepared to pay the increased cost, publishers would presumably reconsider their position. There was one publisher, however, who felt there could be some virtue in indexing some fiction. The recently established and forward looking Scottish firm Mainstream Publishing has not considered it, and cannot see it being of much interest to the general reader, but considers there might be a need for indexing fiction for study purposes.

Indexing fiction—views of literary societies

The views expressed by literary societies (mostly secretaries and editors, but presumably expressing the views held by members) showed them perhaps even more than indexers to be in favour of indexing fiction. This seemed at first surprising, but further consideration suggested the reason. Their needs put them, as index users, in a different category from other readers not so much in kind as in degree. They are students of a specialized field of literature, they study the subject in depth, and everything relating to it is important.

As well as back-of-the-book indexes the societies also make use of separately published indexes covering various kinds of information such as characters, places and subjects; and of such works as bibliographies, concordances, handbooks, dictionaries, guides, companions, ‘who’s who’s and similar compilations. There are many works of this sort dealing with novelists right through the age of novel writing. They bring together threads of a novelist’s work and although sometimes quite brief, they can be much more comprehensive with indexes, summaries of stories, synopses of characters, identification of places, and other matters. A well-known author in this category is Charles Dickens, on whose books at least nine such works have been produced, including one as recently as 1988. There are similar publications on George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and a host of others. More recent publications include Who’s who in H. G. Wells by Brian Ash (Elm Tree Books, 1979) which lists in some detail the characters in Wells' novels, then, briefly, the novels and short stories and includes a bibliography of works about him. Hilary Spurling’s Handbook to Anthony Powell’s Music of time (Heinemann, 1977) lists characters but also has three separate indexes of books, paintings and places—the last containing not only towns and other places one might expect to find, but also individual public houses, private residences, roads, clubs, etc. As far as is appropriate, the book gives references for entries. It finishes with a synopsis of each volume in the series. Terence Kilmartin’s Guide to Proust: Remembrance of things past (Chatto and Windus, 1983) indexes, separately, fictional characters in the story, real persons, places and also themes. Such abstract subjects as those in ‘theme’ indexes may add considerably to the usefulness of an index.

The societies which would find such works as these useful are varied. Many have been founded since the war, but some can trace their history back to the last century. They range from large organizations such as the Incorporated Bronte Society, founded in 1893, with about 2,800 members, to quite small ones such as the Mary Webb Society, founded in 1972, with about 85, and the authors represented range from Edgar Wallace and Dorothy Sayers to Beatrix Potter and George Eliot. The authors whose works are studied by these societies are not necessarily prolific (for instance, Mary Webb wrote...
only six books of note, Jane Austen six, Jerome K. Jerome four, while Hardy wrote over twenty), nor are they necessarily classics, but to members of the societies any books which help understanding are an important addition to the subject.

The views of the societies on the need for providing comprehensive indexes to individual novels generally support the idea. Most of the respondents considered indexes should be to a group of books, not back-of-the-book indexes to individual novels, and some such works have been compiled by members both for society use and for publication. For instance, the Dorothy L. Sayers Society has undertaken its own indexing of certain aspects such as roads and bridges, firearms, policemen, and cars, among many others. It has also had a ‘Companion’ published commercially. The George MacDonald Society (George MacDonald wrote some adult novels as well as his better known children’s books) mentions the large number of ‘quotable’ remarks on moral and spiritual matters written by the author which would be of interest to students, as well as the more straightforward matters of characters and places. They feel that students would appreciate an index. It would be a massive undertaking, but they hope the idea, having been suggested, might be followed up. One society which has done some indexing of its own, for instance of characters and places, thinks there would be a demand among students for a full index of its author, even suggesting that the Society of Indexers might appropriately undertake the work. The Gaskell Society suggests that indexes (of the handbook type) are undervalued by literary scholars although they are very useful both in teaching and research.

Then up comes the spectre of cost. The George Eliot Fellowship says that scholars might find a complete index useful, but it would be so specialized and rarely required that the price would be prohibitive. ‘On the whole’, it adds, ‘we are not in favour of the indexing of fiction’. Comments such as this regarding the expense of indexing and limited funds available were made by several societies. However, the Edgar Wallace Society is happy as things are. The members have not felt the need for indexes although the author has written 181 books and 1,300-odd short stories.

Some works studied by these societies are also studied at college and university level (e.g., those of D. H. Lawrence, George Eliot and Wells) and some appear to be in the category of Mrs Rubin’s ‘cult’ authors (Sayers and Wallace). The former of these two groups of works, as textbooks, certainly seems to merit the effort and cost of indexing.

The views received from literary societies were interesting in that in general they supported the need for indexing fiction, and the work done by some societies in this field is encouraging, but cost is the stumbling block.

Indexing fiction—views of indexers

The subject of indexing fiction has exercised the minds of members of our Society for many years, as can be seen from the articles, letters and reviews in The Indexer which have mentioned the matter. It has been supported by such eminent members as Norman Knight, who considered that new editions of classical novels could profitably be indexed (The Indexer 7 (2) Autumn 1970, 81); and Robert Collison, who made an impassioned but rather impractical plea for a competition for the indexing of classical fiction with possible funding from UNESCO (12 (4) Oct. 1981, 172). Norris McWhirter, also a contributor to The Indexer, wrote:

... I only wish novels were indexed since it would eliminate the irritation of almost having to re-read a whole book to put your finger on one particular incident or passage (12 (3) April 1981, 125).

Consultation with several members of the Society showed more support for indexing fiction than was shown by other groups, except literary societies, but whole-hearted support was by no means evident. One might think, to put at its most mundane level, that an indexing fiction would create work and therefore income for indexers they would on that basis alone support it. That, however, is not the case. There are several possible reasons for this. Indexers as a whole may find that they have more work in the field of non-fiction than they can cope with, but this seems unlikely; they may consider fiction too complicated, which also seems unlikely; a reason put forward by several indexers which shows a worthy moral attitude was that it is not worth indexing, which suggests they have more than simply pecuniary considerations at heart. The following points represent the views given:

1. ‘Popular’ fiction such as ephemeral and throw-away books was almost totally excluded. One indexer says:

Generally speaking, I think most novels need no index—I mean contemporary works, the vast majority of which disappear into obscurity within a few years. Indeed, I question whether I personally would ever find much reason to consult an index in any novel, either past or present. Who wants to retrieve information from a novel?

Another supports this view:

My opinion is that there is no case for routinely indexing contemporary fiction since so much of it is dross and even the better material is usually read right through, once only.

However, another gives a completely opposite view:

In principle the idea [of indexing fiction] is a sound one for many (if not most) works of fiction to which one would like to return to check something specific.

This is the same view as Norris McWhirter’s. One cannot get views more opposed than these.
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2. In more important fiction, especially long and complicated works, the equivalent of the Dramatis Personae in drama would be a great help in disentangling the multiplicity of characters and their relationships. The Indexer Vol. 16 No. 4 October 1989

3. The existence of handbooks, companions and similar works shows that some sort of help is needed in the case of some authors.

4. One member says that a computer-produced concordance might be satisfactory. This would not really serve the purpose. It might name a character a thousand times when a score of entries would suffice; it would not list concepts; it would in some cases be nearly as long as the novel itself; and preparation and production costs would be considerable. In any case, concordances and indexes are intended to serve different purposes: a concordance is a list of all the words in a work, while an index is a selective list of items arranged in meaningful groups.

5. The economics of the task would deter many publishers.

6. However, one indexer considers problems of a different sort to be inherent in the indexing of fiction. 'I feel', she says, 'that dangers would lurk round every corner for the unwary indexer. What if one gave away all the denouements and spoiled the story?' Would this really be a problem? A reader of novels reads them for pleasure. If a reader starts at some point other than the beginning does it matter, as long as he enjoys what he reads? Does it really matter if the reader looks at the index and finds out how the story ends? In real life the reader is often given the result of a story before the events leading up to that result: for instance, in a newspaper account of a court case the verdict is frequently given at the beginning and is followed by an account of the trial which preceded it.

7. If a novel were to be indexed, how should it be done? Regarding contents, the following points could well be considered:

(a) A novel can give the views of the author either directly or through his characters. Novels frequently contain an element of autobiography and apart from biography and history, novels are one of the few types of literature which deal with people as opposed to things, either factually or imaginatively. Consequently, serious fiction may contain important reflections and sentiments.

(b) A historical novel or one based on historical fact can give important information and some novels of this sort include notes and a bibliography which emphasize the historical basis.

(c) The book may simply be sufficiently interesting in its events and descriptions for a reader to want to refer to particular items.

How should the indexing of fiction be done? There may be problems, but the excellent account of the problems encountered in the indexing of biographies given by Hazel Bell at the SI's Cheltenham Conference in 1988 (see The Indexer 16 (3) April 1989, 168–72) would help to solve some of them since in some ways (not content) biography and fiction have something in common. As an argument against indexing fiction one indexer points out that the indexing of concepts would be extremely difficult, but this seems to be a very negative attitude. Surely such a task should be undertaken as a challenge to an indexer's ingenuity, not written off as something too difficult. Indexers know about thesauri and other suitable books and they are expected to show common sense and initiative. However, the question of how to index fiction is a red herring in the context of this article, which is intended to consider if there is a demand for it rather than how it should be done.

The Editor of The Indexer, Hazel Bell, is one of those who believe strongly that fiction should be indexed and has made extensive comments on the subject. In her review of Clive James's Brilliant creatures (The Indexer 13 (4) Oct. 1983, 277) she writes:

The provision of indexes to works of fiction is sought by our societies [i.e., SL and affiliated societies] as good normal practice in an ideal publishing world, so that passages may be located in these as well as in non-fiction. The merits of indexing such light-hearted works as Brilliant creatures relate less to information retrieval; but indexing all such fiction would provide indexes that were enjoyable to read, more work for proliferating indexers, and more fun in our labours.

She is not being over-serious here, clearly, and one cannot visualize there ever being a publishing world in which a commercial publisher would decide to have an index compiled simply for the financial benefit of the indexer and to provide fun in preparing it.

However, in another more serious passage, not yet published, she gives an insight into indexing fiction which even novelists themselves may not have consciously thought of:

The literary [as opposed to the technical] indexer should value the book he works on as the work of the author's imagination, an aesthetic unity with its own rhythm, pace and pattern, which should all contribute to its effect. We reduce a chiming clock to tidy piles of metal pieces; elegant buildings to stone and mortar, neatly laid in rows. How much greater a thing it is to compile than to analyse—almost we might say, to create than to destroy. Perhaps these are the reasons for the indifference, almost hostility, to indexes that this journal has sometimes detected in authors—that they find it painful to see their so carefully assembled spells efficiently unravelled by us, the harmony shattered?

Here the Editor gets to the crux of the matter when she suggests that there is a conflict between author and indexer. It may be possible for novelists and indexers to put themselves in each others' shoes—indeed, there may
be novelists who are also indexers—but clearly their views differ. To authors the novel is an art form which requires chiming clocks and elegant buildings, and clearly they do not consider their reduction to tidy piles of metal and rows of stones and mortar helpful. They are not dealing with facts, but with ideas and thoughts which even they may be unable to put satisfactorily into their individual pigeon-holes. Authors are so closely involved in their work, indeed responsible for its existence, that seeing the result of their labours taken out of context and rearranged by others without the same degree of involvement is disturbing to them.

Some novels that have been indexed—English and French classics

Among the few novels which have been indexed it is in modern editions of classical works that one might expect to find indexes since these works are frequently used by students. Those indexes that have been done are not always of especial merit. The A. & C. Black editions of Scott’s Waverley novels are a case in point. There are 21 editions of the Waverley novels published from 1829 to 1914 listed in the Cambridge bibliography of English literature, 1966, and far more in the British Museum catalogue of printed books. I have examined a considerable number of these, although not all, and only Black has provided an index (1886–7). Several editions by this publisher have indexes, but all appear to be reprints of the first one. They are very short. Count Robert of Paris contains three pages out of a book length of 400 pages. It consists mainly of proper names, but includes the rather unnecessary entry ‘Glossary’. Old Mortality contains six pages out of 452, including two quotations from the text, ‘The error of my ways!’ (ch 6) indexed under ‘T’; and ‘A sparrow on the house-top’ (ch 13) indexed under ‘A’, presumably being alphabetized in this way because they are quotations. Another edition published by the same firm in 1892 in five volumes has a cumulative index to all the novels, and a substantial number of its entries are quotations. The indexes to these volumes consist mainly, but not entirely, of proper names. To some extent they are useful: after all, many indexes consist of names of characters and places only or with the addition of titles. However, novels consist of far more than simply people. They contain the author’s thoughts, reflections and opinions, and these would have been useful here. Of this edition one of our members writes that the index is one ‘which I find interesting but can’t imagine using’.

The Oxford University Press includes indexes to some of its reprints of classical novels. For instance, they published an edition of the novels of Jane Austen before World War 2, with brief indexes. Emma has an index of characters (mostly indicating simply the first appearance) and an index of ‘Feigned places’. The index of characters in Pride and Prejudice has four entries for the Reverend William Collins, but these do not include the well known incident of his proposal to Elizabeth Bennet. The index has its uses, but there are no entries for ideas and other abstractions which could be so useful. In some volumes of the Wesleyan edition of classical works there is an index of sorts (and ‘of sorts’ is the operative point). Amelia is indexed, but when examined in detail it transpires that the index to nearly 600 pages refers almost entirely to the introduction, appendices and editor’s notes. There are few entries for the text of the story and for Fielding’s own notes. To all intents and purposes, therefore, this is not an index to Fielding’s novel but to the editor’s comments upon it. Joseph Andrews (1967 in this edition) has no index at all.

Of the Oxford English novels series published fairly recently only a few appear to have an index. The stories were originally written mainly in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and among some well known works such as Walpole’s Castle of Otranto (1764) and Burney’s Evelina (1778) there are a number of titles less well known to non-specialists such as The spiritual Quixote (Richard Graves, 1772), Mordaunt (John Moore, 1800) and Melmoth the Wanderer (Charles Robert Maturin, 1820, Oxford edition 1968). As these are reprints of existing works there would presumably be no great pressure on an indexer to complete an index in a hurry. Indeed, the work could perhaps be carried out at leisure by an indexer who was also a specialist in the field. The only title in the series which the writer has seen which has an index is Defoe’s Memoirs of a cavalier (1720, Oxford edition 1972). The information on the dust jacket gives the reason for this:

The Cavalier is a fictional character; nevertheless the details of the campaigns of Gustavus Adolphus and of the English Civil War in which he takes part derived from Defoe’s careful investigation of contemporary records.

The index is a biographical index only and records the first appearance of the person named. It owes its existence to the fact that the characters named were real people.

It is such books as these that are used by students, and most of us who have taught literature at any level must have had the experience of wanting to refer to a particular passage and being unable to find it. Likewise for students themselves it is frustrating to find, when preparing an essay, that a passage they wish to consult eludes them. It would indeed seem to be a boon, in spite of evidence to the contrary, to hardpressed academics and students if such textbooks were provided with an index.

Some of the best indexes to classical novels the writer has found are not to English but to French works—those published by Gallimard in the Pléiade edition. Proust (1871–1922), A la recherche du temps perdu, published in this series in 1954 and reprinted in 1961, is in three volumes totalling approximately 3,500 pages. The index consists of 151 pages or about 4·3% of the total length. It is actually in two parts:
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1. Index des noms de personnes (109 pp.).
2. Index alphabétique des noms de lieux, de contrées et d’habitants (42 pp.).

This index was used extensively by Terence Kilmartin in compiling his Guide to Proust: Remembrance of things past (Chatto and Windus, 1983. See The Indexer 14 (2) Oct. 1984, 142). Kilmartin’s work, however, was not intended to be an index but a guide, and is not as complete as one would expect an index to be. However, whereas the Pléiade edition contains only persons and places in its index, Kilmartin’s contains four separate indexes consisting of Proust’s characters, real people, places, and themes such as heredity, jealousy and laughter. Perhaps the novel itself was given an index because it contains a large element of autobiography and has many characters.

A new edition of this work, in four volumes, is currently in preparation (1987–). The last volume will contain an index. Another edition, published by Garnier-Flammarion, which has recently completed publication, has no index, and a review in the Times Literary Supplement bemoans this lack.6

Another work in this series is by Balzac (1799–1850): La comédie humaine, published in twelve volumes between 1976 and 1981. This is a colossal work of approximately 19,000 pages and is befittingly provided with a colossal index, totalling 775 pages or about 4.8%. It is arranged in four parts:

1. Index des personnages fictifs (439 pp.).
2. Index des personnes réelles et des personnages historiques ou de la mythologie (265 pp.).
3. Index des citées par Balzac (68 pp.).
4. Index des œuvres des personnages fictifs (3 pp.).

From the indexing point of view it is interesting to compare these two writers with Scott. In the case of Proust, the various books taken together form a complete story; they are not a series of independent stories such as Scott’s are. To a lesser degree the same is true of Balzac. In La comédie humaine, although each novel is a separate entity, the series, as an overview of society in Balzac’s day, has a thread running through it in that some characters appear in several stories. In the case of Scott each story is an independent unit (with a few exceptions such as the two works The monastery and The abbot which form a series). In the case of Proust and Balzac the index, although restricted to names of people, places and works, is substantial and shows that Librairie Gallimard recognize that there is a real need for an index to this kind of work.

Some novels that have been indexed
—modern English works

A few recent novels have been provided with an index upon first publication. Some have been mentioned in The Indexer from time to time. Virginia Woolf’s Orlando, originally published in 1928, has an index of two pages out of a total of 299 listing characters and titles of literary works. Incidentally, this book is an example of how an index may help to cause confusion in categorizing its subject. When the first edition was published

Woolf’s playfulness about Orlando’s category met difficulties; booksellers, confused by its status as biography, as indicated on the title page, and supported by its possession of an index, refused to sell it as fiction. Nevertheless, overcoming at least that joke, Orlando sold well . . .7

Kurt Vonnegut’s Jailbird (1979) has one (4 pages out of 246). This was written as an autobiographical novel and the index simply lists the names of characters with no subheadings (see review in The Indexer 12 (2) Oct. 1980, 109). Some other entries would have been useful. In the story Vonnegut gives his definition of an anarchist; he says how ungrateful to America some immigrants were; MacDonald’s Hamburgers Division had to use pictures on their cash registers because of the difficulty of finding employees who understood numbers; and labour history was equivalent to pornography to ‘nice people’. How useful it would be to find this information in an index!

Clive James’s Brilliant creatures (1983) has an index (15 pages out of 317) consisting mainly of characters and titles but also having a few other entries such as ‘lunches, literary, Fricay (the Dregs)’. This index does have subheadings (see review in The Indexer 13 (4) Oct. 1983, 277). Another indexed novel is the children’s book The lion in the gateway by Mary Renault (1964), an account of the wars of ancient Persia. Although only 193 pages in length and with large print, it contains a glossary and an index to persons, places and titles. One would like to think that these adjuncts were put in to teach children that a book can contain more than just a story.

Another recent novel with an index, although not in the first edition, is George Orwell’s Nineteen eighty-four (originally published 1949). The only edition the present writer has seen which contains an index is that published by the OUP under the Clarendon Press imprint in 1984.8 There have been many editions of the book. The British national bibliography lists seven in the period 1981–5 alone, and the Clarendon Press edition is the only entry in which an index is mentioned. The book has in fact two indexes, the first to the introduction and annotations of the editor (4½ pages to 174 pages of text, 2½%) and the other to Orwell’s text (a smaller proportion than the first, 1½%). The important index from the present point of view is that to Orwell’s text, which contains rather more than most indexes to fiction. Much of the text, no matter how far-fetched it seemed when first published and may still do to those living in the western world, nevertheless is written in such a factual way that it reads like non-fiction and is ideally suited to be indexed. In addition to proper names, mostly fictional, it contains many subjects, both abstract and concrete, such as ‘beer (a prole

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single reference. The text reads, ‘Winston looked back when he had gone thirty metres’. As we were still working happily with yards, feet and inches when the book was written, it is clear that Orwell was a very far-seeing man.

It may be interesting to try to find out if these books have anything in them which makes them especially appropriate for indexing. One feature is that most of them contain characters from real life; thus they have a non-fictional aspect although all the incidents attributed to these characters may not be true. This, and the fact that they are written with a ring of non-fiction about them, may be the reason. Other novels by some of these writers tend to be more obviously fictional. However, although there are many novels published which contain real-life characters, very few of them are indexed.

Two, more recent, novels which have indexes are Lucy Ellmann’s *Sweet desserts* (Virago, 1988) and Malcolm Bradbury’s *My strange quest for Mensonge: structuralism's hidden hero* (Deutsch, 1987, Arena, 1989). As is made clear by Judy Batchelor in a recent article (*The Indexer* 16 (3) April 1989, 194) neither of these indexes is intended to be taken seriously, both are meant rather as a joke. Indeed, of the first she says, ‘... the index is more entertainment than use; but so, after all, is a novel’. And of the second, ‘... all the page-references are incorrect—how could they not be? The index makes jolly reading in its own right’. Such indexes would surely delight Professor Heckscher.

Some novels for which an index would be especially useful are detailed historical novels, especially where the author provides scholarly references and a bibliography. As the presence of these has already taken away the fictional nature of the book, an index would be no more than a logical extension. A counter argument could be that all the characters and other indexed matter take on a semblance of reality, and a reader might be misled into believing more than the author intended. As references and a bibliography are (usually) really factual, an index containing the names of fictional characters intermingled with real ones may lead the reader to assume that they are all real.

Two books which could usefully be indexed, but are not, are Robert Graves’s lengthy novel *Claudius the god* (1934) and H. F. M. Prescott’s *The man on a donkey* (1952). In the case of Graves’s book (328 pages of small print) the author points out that few incidents are wholly unsupported by historical authority and no character is invented. The second story is about the Pilgrimage of Grace (1536), and with over 700 pages of text and a list of nearly 80 works consulted, the interwoven fiction and history clearly contains a lot of history.

**Conclusion**

The demand for indexes to fiction is small. On the whole they are not wanted by novelists, reviewers, readers or publishers. Literary societies show some interest in them and indexes are lukewarm. When support is shown it is for books of merit, especially acknowledged classics, and not for the bulk of fiction which will soon be forgotten. In many cases the question of cost was given as a factor, but there was a feeling, especially among authors, that novels are not the sort of books that need to be indexed. They do not contain factual information in the way that non-fiction works do, and if a reader wishes to check something he should read it in its context—a page or chapter. A novel is a structure which cannot be reduced to its constituent parts without losing something. Publishers are almost universally against indexing novels. This is mainly for financial reasons, but as there is little demand for it within the other groups it is not likely that publishers are going to put themselves to the expense of producing them and thereby put up the price of books and reduce sales.

**References**


I should like to express my thanks to all those people who sent me their views on indexing fiction.

Philip Bradley is former Senior Librarian of Dundee College of Technology, is Review Editor of *The Indexer*, and author of An index to the Waverley novels (*Scarecrow Press*, 1975; 696 pp).

**How a user is lost**

*How a book is made*, written and illustrated by Aliki (Bodley Head, 1986) is a welcome introduction to the world of books for children born into the electronic age. Sadly, there is not even a passing reference to indexes or indexing.

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