Freelance forum of four

On 11 October 1989 Women in Publishing, a ten-year-old organization working to promote the interests of women in publishing and related trades, hosted a ‘Freelance Forum’ attended by representatives from the Society of Indexers (Elizabeth Wallis on the platform), the Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders, and the Society of Women Writers and Journalists. All these found that they shared common problems in dealing with publishers, training difficulties, entry to their professions, solitude, lack of feedback, matters of payment (both charging and receipt), and private overheads to be provided for—listed by Naomi Laredo of SFEP as, ‘office provision and maintenance, sickness, holidays, lunch hours, pension’. Elizabeth Wallis described publishing as ‘an amateurish profession’ and spoke of the disorganization of the freelance market, with the necessity of uniting to get decent pay rates. For proofreading, copy-editing and indexing, in ascending order, the rates of pay negotiated by the National Union of Journalists are considerably higher than those charged by the freelancers attending the meeting, or recommended by their societies: as indeed are the rates paid to publishers’ secretaries, and newspaper subeditors. Indexing appeared a topic of particular interest to all those present, from the viewpoints alike of authors, indexers, editors and publishers.

There was enthusiasm for the getting together of these four societies with so much in common, and agreement that information would be exchanged among them for their respective newsletters and journals, with hopes of further joint meetings.

H. K. B.

INDEXERS IN FICTION

Index of character

Lewis Percy is, like many of Anita Brookner’s characters, a librarian, academic, and ineffectual.* His life is presented as cautious, regular, low-key, until he breaks out and departs for new opportunities in America. The progress of the card-index he works on through the book appears an indication of his attitudes to life.

On receiving his doctorate for a study of French literature, Percy starts work in the university library, cataloguing articles in the many publications allotted to him. This subject index kept him in touch with work in his field and even with work outside it. It was not uninteresting; it had a certain dignity. He was aware that he needed a dignity of his own, and was glad to find it in his work.

In his greatest humiliation, when his wife has left him, Percy seeks refuge in his index: ‘He looked humbly round him at the library, and applied himself with infinite care to his index cards.’ When a new career in America is in prospect, the ‘beguiling normality’ of the index nearly conquers:

Lewis found it so soothing the he almost abandoned thoughts of departure and a new life. Like a man in a trance he raised his eyes every few minutes to the clock: every catalogue card took on the lustre of a reliquary.

The index is on-going, requiring constant updating (‘You’re supposed to be doing that for the rest of your life,’ his friend tells him)—and hand-written. When

Percy proposes that it should be typed, and on larger cards, his shocked superior declares himself unable to take the responsibility of authorizing such rash departure from settled ways.

The new technology, though, eventually overtakes this index, as it has so many others. The dialogue between the computerization enthusiast and the indexer himself may be archetypical:

‘You won’t have to do that much longer, Lewis,’ said Goldsborough. ‘Once we’ve installed the computers,’ he added ...

‘Just as a matter of interest, Arnold, what will happen to the index?’

‘But my dear fellow!’ exclaimed Goldsborough. ‘This will be the index’s finest hour! The index will henceforth be immortal. The index, Lewis, will be transformed into a permanent record. By you,’ he added.

‘You mean,’ said Lewis slowly, ‘that I transfer the index? That I key it in, or whatever one does, right from the beginning? In other words, that I start doing it all over again? This will create years of backlog, Arnold.’

But Lewis escapes this labour, fleeing to a new career in a new country with a new woman; so we never learn whether he would come to welcome and exult in the machinery. Some of us do, some of us don’t... This novel is short, and its end somewhat indeterminate. Perhaps our readers may like to compose their own alternative endings or sequels, showing Percy eagerly working on his computer, or resisting, or mourning. Anyway, it’s nice to find that indexers in fiction are right there, keeping up to date with their counterparts and their dilemmas in the real technological world.

* Lewis Percy by Anita Brookner; Cape, 1989; quoted here by permission.

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Fortuitous conjunctions

Scientific essays written for a general audience, when collected into volumes, often have indexes that make good reading in themselves. They are fascinating to the wide-ranging indexing mind, not just in the scope of their subject entries but more so in their arbitrary alphabetic juxtapositions.

The index to Peter Medawar’s Pluto’s Republic (O.U.P., 1982) starts auspiciously with abduction (the see also refers us to induction); it stops at x-rays, leaving zoology and zygomorphs to other writers. In between, Jane Austen rubs shoulders with W. H. Auden and Oswald Avery (an early worker on DNA), and Benjamin Britten with Jane Brody (N.Y. Times science writer).

John Dee (mathematician and astrologer) is separated from Charles Darwin by deduction and deductive reasoning. Economics follow ecology, equality follows epigenesis. Euclid is starkly set between long entries on ethology and eugenics. Fascism, fashion and fatalism precede fecundity (human); thereafter we eventually arrive at futurity.

The i’s have it all: idealism, imagination, imbecility, immunology, induction, information theory, inspiration, instinct, intelligence, intuition, inventors, IQ psychology—even the International Psychoanalytic Congress (Stockholm, 1963). Samuel Johnson is mentioned five times, jokes only once.

Knowledge merits fewer page references than Arthur Koestler. Love is followed closely by luck; marriage prohibitions by Marxism and materialism. Nietzsche is perilously close to Newton and Neoplatonism—are philosophers of science aware of this? Observation redeems obscurity; the biological order precedes George Orwell.

Names of some of the famous are made to stand out by abundant page references, and others are singled out in different ways: Pascal, Pasteur, Pauling (Linus) and Peacock (Thomas Love) are islanded at the bottom of a page. Turn the page to find personality, philosophy and poetry jostling with prayer, progress, proof and public schools; the Piltdown skull, William Pitt and Pythagoras are thrown in for good measure.

There are of course long entries for science and scientist, but good mention for sociology, too. Teachability optimistically precedes the entry on technology, which ends with the gloomy subheading ‘and deterioration of world’. There is time, The Times and (elsewhere) Sunday Times. Tools and topology take us to transformation. There is truth, tuberculosis, tumours, and—to keep things in perspective—Mark Twain.

Browsers who despair of finding anything of interest can turn back to entries on blushing, criticism (‘in scientific discovery’ or ‘literary’), dreams, care (psychiatric) and healing (psychiatric), memory, mental illness, morphogenetic forces, myth (and truth), nature/nurture, neuroses, reason, Restoration comedy, stock-breeding, or stories. Bedazzled, they can resign themselves to Utopias, weather prediction or witchcraft.

Alas, nothing is said about Zarathustra or the zodiac!

Thinking about thinking

The index to Paul Johnson’s Intellectuals (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988) has a most revealing series of subheadings and sub-subheadings under the heading, INTELLECTUAL CHARACTERISTICS: anger, aggressiveness, violence, espousal of principle of violence; canonization of; courage, cowardice; cruelty; deceitfulness, dishonesty, passion for truth; egocentricity, egotism; genius for self-publicity; hypocrisy; ingratitude [sic], rudeness; intolerance, misanthropy; love of power; manipulativeness, exploitativeness, quarrelsomeness; self-deception, gullibility; selfishness, ruthlessness, unselfishness; self-pity, paranoia; self-righteousness; shiftlessness, sponginess; snobbery, intellectual snobbery; vanity.

We trust that these are offered as the characteristics of intellectuals rather than intellectual characteristics—alas for the loss of prepositions in index headings!

Are editorial standards declining? Who cares?

The Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders promotes high editorial standards and recognition of its members’ professional status, by providing training, information and advice. If you are a freelance proofreader or editor, or if you work with freelancers, you can support these aims by joining the Society as an individual or corporate member.

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