Wheatley winners: women come second?

Doreen Blake

Having done her sums, your Editor posed her question: why have only six women won the Wheatley Medal, and 19 men?

This is an interesting observation, worthy of investigation. The criteria for evaluating printed subject indexes, based on those used as guidelines by the Wheatley Medal selection committee, were discussed in this journal 14 years ago by Geoffrey Hamilton, who considered length, introductory notes, coverage of significant items, choice of terms, cross-references, subheadings, arrangement of entries, presentation, and indexes of different types. Here, after several years' experience on the Wheatley Panel, I shall consider instead, pragmatically, the actual winners and their shared characteristics, if any.

We must accept at the outset that there is no discrimination in the judging, as until about four years ago the judging panel did not know the identity of the indexer. Since then it has become usual to have the complete list of indexers present because it is the practice of some publishers, but not all, to acknowledge the indexer, thereby making it difficult to carry out the rule of total anonymity. Also, indexers are now being encouraged to send in their own work, obviously revealing their identity. However, unless there is a particular need, mostly the panel does not know, nor is interested in, the identity of the indexer. One or two of the reasons why the identity might be called for would be: to ascertain that the person comes within the criteria of the Wheatley rules; a panel member may want to know whether the author or editor indexed the book; or to deal with any query that may occur during discussion of a particular point.

Why, then, do fewer women than men win the Wheatley Medal? (The sub-species of wifely indexers appointed by default, as considered in our article, 'She who must be an indexer' (The Indexer 16(3), 192–3), of course can be eliminated from consideration in this context.)

There has not been enough time to tell whether women may lack confidence to submit their own work. Even so, there are more female than male indexers in the Society of Indexers' lists. We cannot know about the unaffiliated indexers who exist out there! Eleven winners of the medal are not members of the Society.

On considering the 25 winners of the medal, 10 were in the engineering/archaeological/law/medical/scientific subject range. These are professions where there are more men than women, and it could follow that specialization by indexers in these subjects would be in the same ratio, though this seems doubtful.

On this theme, one wonders whether more men go on to higher qualifications than women. Certainly in The Library Association there are more women members than men (approximately 60:40) but in the higher positions there are more men than women. For indexing serious books more advanced knowledge is required. This in itself poses a query: whether more serious books win medals, which is considered below.

Is there some discrimination at the point of submission, knowingly or unknowingly? This seems unlikely. The publishers of the books put forward are very diverse. The list at Figure 1 indicates that the Cambridge University Press has won four medals, Oxford, Clarendon Press, Athlone Press, The Library Association, and Butterworth have won two each. This shows how scattered the sources are, and it would be difficult indeed to insert bias at this stage.

Figure 1 Publishers of books winning Wheatley Medals

Note: The gaps in the years occur when the medal was not given.

1962 Macmillan
1963 W. & R. Chambers
1964 Athlone Press
1965 Cambridge University Press
1967 Heinemann
1968 Cambridge University Press
1970 Athlone Press
1973 HMSO
1974 Butterworth
1975 Cambridge University Press
1977 Cambrian Archaeological Association
1978 Library Association
1979 Pitman Medical
1980 Library Association
1981 Institution of Civil Engineers
1982 Government of Trinidad and Tobago
1983 Bell and Hyman
1985 Oxford University Press
1987 Wilson’s School Charitable Trust
1988 Butterworth
Nomination slips reveal that most entries come from publishers. Some come from indexers nominating other indexers, and a few people nominate their own indexes.

Would an investigation into the qualifications and experience of the medal winners produce any relevant information? It may show what is needed to achieve the award in any one subject; but, like the publishers, the winners are diverse and from many backgrounds, and there would probably not be a common denominator. Does any one person set out to win a Wheatley Medal when he or she accepts a commission?

The Editor also wondered whether there is any type of index which is prone to win, and whether these books might be indexed more by men. In other words, if we accept for a moment the premise put forward above, do the technical books mentioned come higher in the winning league than historical or literary works? The list at Figure 2 would tend to discredit that theory.

Are there books which are not prone to win? This can easily be answered in the negative by the main criteria of the Wheatley Medal rules. Winning indexes must be comprehensive, outstanding, literate and accurate.

Does the panel go for anything in particular? (There are six panellists, with different specialties and ideas, and the representation is wide. The panel members change over the years, so there is no long-term bias, either subject or personality-wise.) Definitely not. Depending on the number of entries, the panel members deliberate over one, two or three days, coming together to discuss their findings on a day appointed by themselves, with the cooperation of The Library Association.

Each index is looked at from a list of many different criteria, from comprehensiveness, explanatory note, clarity and layout, to cross-referencing, subheadings, alphabetization, spelling and arrangement, most important of all being the interpretation of the book in indexing terms. Panel members are not informed whether the index was prepared with the assistance of an automated process, and, mostly, this is not obvious.

Design is not an important consideration for the Wheatley judges; it is felt that this is in the hands of the publishers more than the indexers.

The panel is often thought to exclude everything that has strings of page numbers, too much lower-case, or too many italics.

Whether subheadings are run-on or not is considered very much in the context of the publication—not turned down out of hand. Likewise strings of numbers, although many strings of 10 or more probably would be not be good, particularly if, in the final judging, the other entrants had managed to avoid this. Even at this stage, however, the panel members would look at the indexer’s reasons for taking a particular course.

Each index is marked on each criterion mentioned, always with reference to the specific publication being indexed (this is important). The marks in each section are added together for a final result. Comparison between indexes is not encouraged. It is therefore an overall picture that emerges, never a failing on the same points.

So it is difficult to understand why there have been more men than women winners of the medal. Maybe the answer is much more complicated than can be seen here... or perhaps it is very simple: just chance.

Reference


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Figure 2 Subjects of books whose indexes won the Wheatley Medal

8 historical/biographical/letters
4 law
3 medical
2 archaeological/history
2 literary/history
2 technical/scientific/engineering
2 librarianship
1 editing
1 instructions for fishing