

# Should fiction be indexed?

## The indexability of text

Hazel K. Bell

Considers what features of texts make them appropriate or necessary to be supplied with an index, and distinguishes between informational and literary text. Serious fiction is seen as comprising elements of both types of text, and the particular difficulties of indexing it, and the value of indexes to fiction, are considered.

Scholarly editions of literary fiction may come complete with critical apparatus of introductions, footnotes, glosses and appendices—but not indexes. Indeed, indexes to fiction are rarely produced, not generally demanded, and often assumed to be unnecessary or inappropriate, as, in 1989, Philip Bradley found in his survey of the views of publishers and authors of the need for indexes to fiction.<sup>1</sup> Yet non-fiction is almost standardly expected to be provided with indexes, and reviewers often complain if it is not. What makes the difference?

If there are texts for which indexing is considered necessary and appropriate, then in what ways do these differ from fiction? What type of text is indexable? How should we differentiate between types of text?

### *Hard texts*

I suggest that types of text can be seen as ranged through a continuum. At one extreme lies STM (science, technical and medical texts), particularly the technical manual. As an example of STM text, here is a passage from *Natural rubber science and technology* (Oxford University Press, 1988), from a chapter headed CHEMICAL MODIFICATION OF NATURAL RUBBER, with a section heading, MODIFICATION RESEARCH, and subheading, CLASS:

The effects on properties of functionalizing natural rubber with chemical groups will clearly depend on the degree of functionalization. Early modification methods, especially cyclization and *cis,trans*-isomerization, were generally difficult to control and gave very heavily modified materials. The more recent methods, which utilize the various types of molecular reaction, give good control over extent of reaction since reaction is confined to individual olefinic sites on the rubber. In principal, then, it is possible to achieve any given degree of modification. In practice, other factors limit the degree of modification which may be achievable or desirable. Apart from purely chemical considerations, such as increasing incursion of side reactions, the primary factors are purpose and cost.

This is text composed entirely of hard facts, expressed in direct statements, in the basic, barest, standard vocabulary of the discipline. It is impersonal, with no attempt to individualize the perception or make the expression artistic, the style pleasing; structured in clearly defined sections and subsections, ready provided with subheadings. The sole aim is clarity; it is purely information-bearing text, and eminently indexable. Rules and standards can well be established and applied to indexing this type of text, almost as templates. To the skilled indexer of the appropriate specialism, the correct index would be predictable.

### *Literary texts*

At the other extreme of the continuum of text-type lies literary text, in which meaning is conveyed or implied by deploying sound, form, rhythm, imagery, association and symbolism. For example, this sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Starlight Night':

Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!  
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!  
The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!  
Down in dim woods the diamond delves! the elves'-  
eyes!  
The grey lawns cold where gold, where quickgold lies!  
Wind-beat whitebeam! airy abeles set on a flare!  
Flake-doves sent floating forth at a farmyard scare!—  
Ah well! it is all a purchase, all is a prize.  
Buy then! bid then!—What?—Prayer, patience, alms,  
vows.  
Look, look: a May-mess, like on orchard boughs!  
Look! March-bloom, like on mealed-with-yellow sal-  
lows!  
These are indeed the barn; withindoors house  
The shocks. This piece-bright paling shuts the spouse  
Christ home, Christ and his mother and all his hal-  
lows.

This is by no means meaningless. It holds much, dense meaning; but the reader must derive his own meaning, responding personally. There are few direct statements, and those not necessarily the most significant parts. The text

---

Paper first presented at a meeting of the Society of Indexers, London, 19 March 1992.

contains and uses much more than mere information. The vocabulary is chosen for its sound, freshness, and association; basic, common or standardized terms are avoided. Here, description itself is more important than the object described, and the form is more significant than the content. Indexers fasten on content, not form. This type of text I would consider quite unindexable, let alone predictably.

So indexability seems to derive from the manner in which information is presented and conveyed, and the type of language chosen to do it in; it must be explicit, deliberate statement, to be indexed. Indexing what is only implied or conveyed by artistic means would be both presumptuously difficult to do and crudely destructive of the author's intention to suggest, to evoke a personal response in the reader.

### *Fiction as a text-type*

Where on this range from the information-comprised to the almost-no-direct-information-conveying text does fiction lie?

I suggest that the best, serious fiction includes elements of both, as a hybrid form. (I am not here considering romantic, escapist, trivial fiction—easy indeed to index, but not worth the doing.)

### *The facts in fiction*

If fiction is comprised of both types of text, let us consider first its informational content: the basic plots, conveyed in statements.

Fiction usually takes people as its subject, and describes their development, events in their lives, and their social relationships. This is the same informational material as that of histories and biographies, which are usually indexed without question. All three genres—history, biography and fiction—alike recount developments in lives of individuals and societies, actual or postulated, and these may equally well be indexed, in the same way, whether the events and the individuals have in reality occurred or not. In a letter to *The Indexer* commenting on Bradley's survey,<sup>1</sup> Anthony Raven wrote: 'Within the context of a book, i.e. within the purview of its index, all facts are equally factual, regardless of whether they also enjoy a different kind of factuality beyond the book's covers.'<sup>2</sup>

No biography or history can be completely accurate in all its details, anyway; they must all partake to some degree of the nature of fiction, as imaginary reconstructions.

So these informational elements need indexing in all genres. Specific events in people's lives, and the characters they meet, may need to be traced, whether the reader seeks references to Lawrence of Arabia's college years and meetings with Thomas Hardy, or to Randolph Ash's honeymoon and visit to the de Kercoz family—important events in A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Possession*.<sup>3</sup> If we are taking books seriously, we have the same needs for information retrieval with regard to characters, places and events, independently of 'what is truth?'

In indexing five novels by A.S. Byatt,<sup>4</sup> I found that the biographical elements in these yielded indexes appearing little different from those to normal biographies. Here is the entry for one of the characters in *Possession*, Beatrice Nest, which could well come from the index to a straightforward biography:

Nest, Dr Beatrice: appearance and image 112, 116-18; education and career 113-16; work on EA's diaries 27, 31-2, 98, 114-15; private life 116-17; and MC 111, 112, 119-20, 438-9; RM visits 117-20; MB visits 219-22, 232-5; telephones MB 438-40; meeting at her house 476-86; at Hodershall 496-504; *Helpmeets* 31, 115-16

### *Demands for indexes to fiction*

The publishers in Bradley's survey opposed indexes to fiction on the grounds of increased costs and lack of necessity. If indexes are held necessary for histories and biographies, despite their cost, then they are similarly necessary to the plot contents of serious, 'lengthy' fiction. The chief function of an index is to help people find particular passages they want to. Why not make these traceable in serious fiction as well as in any other serious work?

The demand for indexes to fiction has a long history. One of our earliest literary critics, Dr Johnson, asked one of our earliest novelists, Samuel Richardson, to compile an index to his novel, *Clarissa*, published from 1747-9, so that 'when the reader recollects any incident he may easily find it'. More recently, in 1991, Hans Wellisch complained:

*Don Quixote, War and peace, Gone with the wind, to name only a few mighty tomes with dozens or even hundreds of characters, places and events, lack indexes, and many other . . . voluminous and complex novels would also benefit from them. . . . many readers, particularly students who have to do assignments for literature courses, may wish to return to a passage in which a certain character appears, but find it difficult to do so for want of an index.*<sup>5</sup>

### *The trouble with indexing fiction . . .*

The plots and characters of fiction, then—its informational aspects—may well be indexed in the normal way, as appropriately and as necessarily as biography. Objections apply to the other end of the scale, to those factors that distinguish fiction from factual texts: the literary elements, treating language as material for subtle art, vivid exercise of the imagination, association, individual perception—all that is seen in the Hopkins poem. Indexing such creative, imaginative writing, very much the personal world-view of the individual author, could seem brashly intrusive.

In Bradley's survey, these were the grounds of the authors' objections to indexes to fiction. Authors expressed alarm regarding these aspects, most cogently voiced by Jeannette Winterson, author of *Oranges are not the only fruit* among other novels:

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. . . . We need what magic remains in this little life. Let's not nail it down only to find it has disappeared.<sup>1</sup>

And Iris Murdoch replied, when I had asked permission to index her novels:

I don't think I would like an index to be appended to, or published in reference to, a particular novel. It would be difficult to produce one of any length or complexity without introducing an element of literary criticism, for instance indication of, or interpretation of, symbols.

This area, the literary element, is the one where indexers feel great diffidence in setting about their work. But they would not necessarily have to wade in and lay about the symbolism, the metaphors and the magic. Indexing could be deliberately restricted to names and places, with no attempts to index abstract themes and metaphors. In my index to *Possession*, in the entry for Beatrice Nest quoted above, these lines from the novel, which are the stuff of fiction, not biography, are not analysed in indexing terms, but merely subsumed into the subheading, APPEARANCE AND IMAGE:

If they thought of her harder, those few people who knew her might add a metaphoric identity. Cropper thought of her in terms of Carroll's obstructive white sheep. Blackadder, in bad moods, thought of her as one of those puffed white spiders, bleached by the dark, feeling along the threads of her trap from her central lair. The feminists who had from time to time sought access to the Journal saw her as some kind of guardian octopus, an ocean Fafnir, curled torpidly round her hoard, putting up opaque screens of ink or watery smoke to obscure her whereabouts.

As for the treatment of symbols, which caused Iris Murdoch's gainsaying, these surely could be indicated only by reference to the thing in itself. Take as an example of these, the opening chapter of Murdoch's novel, *The Bell*.<sup>6</sup> There, Dora, a young, irresponsible art student, marries Paul, who is thirteen years older, and finds him decisive, possessive, authoritative and violent: 'Something gentle and gay had gone out of her life'. She leaves him and 'passed the summer drinking and dancing and making love and spending Paul's allowance on multi-coloured skirts'. She then decides to return to him, and goes by train, very nervous. On the carriage floor she sees a butterfly crawling; picks it up and holds it safely until the train stops and she gets out and meets her husband who finds she has left his property on the train, and 'His face was harshly closed'. He asks her why she is holding her hands so oddly, and she opens them 'like a flower'; the butterfly 'flew away into the distance'.

Clearly this is a butterfly highly charged with symbolic value; also, this is an interesting passage to find, read and ponder. I see no harm or crudity in indexing it under B as: BUTTERFLY ON TRAIN, or as a subheading under Dora's entry, FINDS BUTTERFLY ON TRAIN. One would not, indeed, index it as BUTTERFLY ON TRAIN (REPRESENT-

ING SPIRIT OF GAIETY AND FREEDOM), nor under S as SPIRIT OF GAIETY AND FREEDOM *see* BUTTERFLY. One would offer indication only: 'there you will find the author's description or treatment of the object'; no attempt to interpret, expound and expose in the index. An entry should be as value-free as a signpost, which tells you only 'It's to be found there'; in which direction to walk to reach a named place, not the qualities of its architecture or site.

Keri Hulme has shown faith in the value of indexes and the appropriate competence of indexers by asking one to compile an index to her Booker Prize-winning novel, *The bone people*—a thoroughly mystical work. The index is to be published 'for academics and students and others'.

### *After whether . . . how*

It seems to me very much more difficult to index such perceptive, creative, human-focused texts, than technical ones. Lancaster wrote in 1991: 'The indexing of imaginative works is likely to be more subjective and interpretative than other types', complicated further by their essentially open-ended scope.<sup>7</sup>

Tact and sensitivity are required, first, in the selection of items for emphasis. We must index only what is actually asserted, not what is merely suggested by literary art; only the informational content of the text. Secondly, we need to match our vocabulary to that of the text, both in precisely conveying the nature of events and in the tone, the attitudes implied.

The question of the language to be used for indexing is much discussed. Technical indexers are told that they must use thesauri to avoid inconsistency and to control synonyms, keeping to 'preferred terms'. This may well be necessary in dealing with multi-author works and rigid subject-disciplines; but, in literary terms, there are no synonyms in our language: there are subtle variations of terms. A literary writer will make a deliberate choice to use a specific term, *le mot juste* for them, and it would be impertinence for indexers to PREFER another one. Indexers must not presume to exercise limitation or control over the language of creative writers; our range of vocabulary must be sensitive and subtle to match their own.

The terms used in a literary index tell the reader, 'this is what you will find in this quite original, unique work'. Those in a subject-discipline index convey, 'this is what you will find in this catalogued item to meet your predetermined search'.

Subheadings—summarizing developments in the characters' lives—require particularly delicate choice of terms. Standardized terminology must be avoided, as the opposite of creativity, of the exercise of imagination, of individual perception and expression. The idea of controlling the vocabulary and standardizing the terms of a creative writer would reduce the highest literature to 'formula fiction', and wholly justify the authors' alarm and antagonism about indexes.

## The value of indexes to fiction

I found the indexes I compiled to Byatt's novels of value in helping to understand them and to appreciate the author's skill. The plot of *Possession* was highly complex, and in indexing it I found a tight underlying structure—no weakness or inconsistency exposed, as often happens in indexing non-fiction works. In the indexes, variations on a theme are clustered. For instance, Melusine, the subject of a major literary work by one character, is a water-spirit seen in an important mythological scene in her bath. Six other bath-rooms are described in the book in detail, matching the varying characters of their owners—a valuable contrast to establish by listing them together in the index. Proserpine is a significant figure through the book, and the index shows how she appears in several different ways, including as a mythological figure studied by Vico; painted by Leighton; and depicted in a poem by the hero of the book. Parallel events in the modern period in which the main characters live and the earlier one they are studying are brought out, as with the successive visits to places in Yorkshire. The recurring theme of the stones found at Boggle Hole by both travelling couples, specimens of which are brought home by the earlier heroine to use as paper-weights, then taken by her friend to aid suicidal drowning, and subsequently referred to in a seance, becomes clear when indexed. And I was able to appreciate the 'sudden wit' attributed to the character who remarks on page 429, 'Cropper is the Ankou', by finding in my index an earlier reference to the Ankou on page 179. (It is indeed a witty remark.)

So serious fiction appears to me to combine an indexable element of normal biography with a literary treatment best left unassailed by indexers. Indexes to fiction are valuable, so the extra difficulty and delicacy required in attempting to compile them are worthwhile.

### References

1. Bradley, Philip. Indexes to works of fiction: the views of producers and users on the need for them. *The Indexer* 16 (4) Oct. 1989, 239-50.
2. Raven, Anthony. Indexes to works of fiction (letter). *The Indexer* 17 (1) April 1990, 60-1.
3. Byatt, A.S. *Possession*. Chatto & Windus, 1990.
4. Bell, Hazel K. Indexing fiction: a story of complexity. *The Indexer* 17 (4) Oct. 1991, 251-6.
5. Wellisch, Hans H. *Indexing from A to Z*. H. W. Wilson Co., 1991.
6. Murdoch, Iris. *The Bell*. Chatto & Windus, 1958. Chapter 1.
7. Lancaster, Wilfred. *Indexing and abstracting in theory and practice*. Library Association, 1991.

---

Hazel Bell is a freelance indexer and editor of *The Indexer*.

---

We acknowledge with thanks permission to quote extracts above granted by A. S. Byatt, Iris Murdoch, Hans H. Wellisch, Chatto & Windus, Peters Fraser & Dunlop, and the Malaysian Rubber Producers' Research Association.

## A Machiavellian index

---

In the year 1475 the Florentine lawyer Bernardo Machiavelli, who was known as a humanist and serious student of Roman antiquities, was asked by a printer in his city, Nicolaus Laurentii, to compile an index of names to Livy's *Decades* (the history of Rome). The printer delivered proof sheets to Machiavelli and no doubt expected the index to be ready soon. But the learned lawyer went about his task in a very thorough manner, indexing not only the names of kings, warriors, and other famous men and women, but also the cities, provinces, islands, mountains and rivers mentioned in Livy's work, so that the job took him nine months. The proof sheets were then taken by his six-year old son Niccolò to a local bindery to be made into a sturdy volume for his father's library.

What happened to the index is, however, not known. The Florentine edition of Livy was apparently never published or, at least, no trace of such an edition can be found in any bibliography of incunables or in the list of known works printed by Laurentii. The story of this index is known from the *Libro di recordi*, written by the elder Machiavelli some ten years later.<sup>1</sup> Niccolò Machiavelli's association with Livy's history did not end, however, with his early trip to the bindery: his most famous work, *The Prince*, originally formed a part of his *Discourses*, which was written in the form of a commentary on Livy's work.

Long after the elder Machiavelli's index to Livy was lost, others rose to the task of providing indexes to this very popular work. It so happened that Johannes Schoeffer (the son and heir of Peter, Gutenberg's assistant and thereafter the first printer) in Mainz, and the no less famous Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, published editions of Livy, independently of each other, in the year 1518. Schoeffer's edition announced on the title page that it had an 'index copiosus', while Aldus proudly claimed that his edition had an 'index copiosissimus rerum omnium memorabilium' and also revealed the name of its compiler, J. Malatesta. That index was indeed 'most copious', occupying no less than 47 leaves. It was reprinted in several other editions of Livy published in the 16th century. This was possible because at that time indexes to classical texts still referred to chapters and sections instead of pages, so that an index, once compiled, could be appended to different editions. Copyright in the modern sense not having been invented as yet, printers freely pirated not only whole works but also their indexes.

### Reference

1. Clough, Cecil H. *Machiavelli researches*. Napoli, 1967, p. 87.

H.H.W.