Updike on indexing

John Updike is better known as a novelist (the Rabbit series, Bech: a Book, Couples) than as a book reviewer. But from 1960 onwards he contributed reviews to The New Yorker magazine, and a selection of these constitutes the major part of a collection of his essays and criticism, Hugging the shore (a further volume is entitled Odd jobs). His comments on indexers and indexing are worth noting, and I am grateful to Norma Munson of Rockford, Illinois, for drawing my attention to them.

Updike positively rejoices in the index to Boswell, Laird of Auchinleck:

'The superb index runs to 68 pages of double columns; the six pages of "Boswell, James" gather the diffuse material into telling condensations, such as "drinks heavily" (31 references), "ill after drinking" (33), "follows, dallies with, visits prostitutes" (13), and "fears, catches, is cured of venereal disease" (16).'

In passing, he notes the absence of an index in a biography of Vladimir Nabokov in a footnote to a review of another book, a collection of Nabokov's literary lectures:

'Disapproved of by its proud subject, and far from error-free, this biography yet constitutes a creditable, if overanimated and index-free, replication of Nabokovian high spirits."

Reviewing a book entitled 200 years of American illustration, he contrasts it unfavourably ("for purposes of invidious comparison") with ‘another recent omnibus, America's great illustrators, by Susan A. Meyer’ which he considers ‘practically ideal’.

‘And where, oh, where is an index? America's great illustrators has a fine one, although its artists are fewer and coherently grouped. In 200 years, the artists are scattered by the winds of layout through the chronological sections; a short biography of each is given at the back of the volume, but no cross-reference is supplied to the plates of their graphic work in this volume, or to the mention of their names in Mr. Pitz's brief history of American illustration.’

However, Updike’s most damning remarks are reserved for Carlos Baker’s selection of the letters of Ernest Hemingway:

‘As a piece of manufacture and editorial work, the volume warrants an A-, perhaps a B+ ... There is no chronology of Hemingway’s life, no bibliography of his works, no glossary of his major correspondents, and no typographical distinction in the index between simple references to a person and letters written to that person. This user found the index erratic. For instance, no reference exists under “Hemingway, Grace Hall” to this definitive blast, in a letter to Charles Scribner, Sr.:

"My mother is very old, her memory is more than spotty and she is addicted to fantastic statements. Lately, because she is so old, I have played the devoted son in case it pleased her. But I hate her guts and she hates mine. She forced my father to suicide..."

'The index also ignores this interesting verdict upon the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno:

"Do you remember what a dull and concealed man Unamuno was? But often he was right. I used to sit around by the hour waiting for him to be right.”'

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References


Christine Shuttleworth

Letters to the editor — continued

moonlighters, full time freelancers and inhouse workers. One size doesn’t fit all, and I’d hate to think that we are trying to squash everyone into one mould, and sidelining those who don’t fit.

Indexing is not a huge profession like medicine or architecture, and this is one of its appeals for me. We are not big enough for large prescribed courses and strict assessment criteria. Indexers come from a variety of backgrounds such as librarianship, publishing and technical writing. These all give useful (although different) starting points to which knowledge of the few rules that indexers have to know can be added. Most of us then choose an ongoing learning process so that we can refine what we know and apply our skills appropriately in each new situation.

I would like to see our energy spent improving our current assessment and registration processes so that they can be applied effectively and promptly for all eligible indexers, no matter what type of material they are indexing. I would like to see continuous quality improvement through courses, conferences, meetings and newsletters, in The Indexer and on Index-L. These will be the most effective ways to promote the cause of indexing and indexers.

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AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF INDEXERS
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