

# Kiss and tell and index

Hazel K Bell

In Alain de Botton's novel, *Kiss and tell* (published by Macmillan, 1995), the hero/narrator, dismissed by his latest girlfriend as totally self-absorbed, determines to prove his possession of the quality of empathy by writing a biography, seeing the biographer's mission as 'understanding a human being as fully as one person could hope to understand another, submerging myself in a life other than my own'. For his subject he will select someone quite ordinary, to demonstrate 'the extraordinariness of any life'. So *Kiss and tell* details the life of the fictitious Isabel Rogers, 'the next person to walk into [his] life', presented in proper biographical format. The 12 chapters begin with 'The early years', 'The early dates', 'Family trees'; the volume comes complete with preface and index, and two sections of photographs of Isabel, her family and friends, all appearing entirely authentic.

A reviewer wrote of de Botton's previous works, *Essays in love* and *The romantic movement*: 'his books are original hybrids, part novel, part philosophical reverie'. This hybrid novel/biography/biographical critique comprises three strands. It is at once the (pseudo-)biography of Isabel; an account of the narrator's developing relationship with her ('one may suggest a connection between attachment and the biographical impulse ... a true biography demands a more or less conscious emotional relationship between author and subject'); and much consideration of the nature of biography itself. The tenor of this can well be assessed by quoting the subheadings under BIOGRAPHY in the index:

- categories
- of dead
- details given in
- discrepancies between author and subject
- eating habits in
- ending
- family research
- ghost-written
- impulse to write
- lack of understanding of subject
- length
- men writing about women
- private life in
- psychology in
- relationship between author and subject
- writing

The 10-page preface quotes Samuel Johnson:

There has rarely passed a life of which a judicious and faithful narrative would not be useful. For, not only has every man great numbers in the same condition with himself, to whom his mistakes and miscarriages, escapes and expedients, would be of immediate and apparent use; but there is such a uniformity in the state of man, considered apart from decorations and disguises, that there is scarcely any possibility of good or ill, but is common to human kind.

There is reflection on the nature of family trees, adapted for this fiction.

The traditional family tree, emerging as it did from the feudal age, was primarily devoted to stressing lineage and dates of birth and death. But in a more psychological age, was the primary responsibility still to record such factual details? Listening to Isabel's description of her family, I wondered if one might not inaugurate a different structure, one which traced not what lands, titles and estates moved down the generations, but rather the passage of emotional dispositions, in short, a [Larkinesque] tree of family fucked-upness?

This is illustrated by a family tree conventional in layout but with annotations such as:

- Christina — depressive, repressive, hysteric =
- Henry Howard — alcoholic, promiscuous, authoritarian
- Isabel — 'We can go into it another day. Are you sure I can't get you anything to eat?'
- Lucy — sandwich problem, masochist, intellectual insecurity
- Paul — aggressive, worshipped too much by mother, neglected by father/sisters

The index — 12 pages, to the text's 246 — is a properly detailed and structured biographical index. It fills out proper names merely mentioned in the text:

- Cioran, E. M.
- Dostoievsky, Fedor Mikhailovich

Large general topics are duly specified as to aspect:

- hands, taking notice of
- London:
  - finding way round
  - views of living in
- men, differences between women and
- sex:
  - continuing friendship after
  - embarrassment of
  - first experience
  - liberal attitude to
  - manual of
  - substitutes for
  - as symbol of intimacy
  - tastes in

with full breakdown for major characters, such as:

- Rogers, Christopher (father)
  - behaviour in restaurants
  - birth of child
  - dental work
  - family background
  - interest in technology
  - with Isabel as child
  - Isabel's opinion of
  - lack of jealousy
  - losing car park tickets
  - making friends with everyone
  - marriage
  - mildness
  - move to London
  - plan for looking at paintings

seeing Isabel at Barbican  
sex with Lavinia Rogers  
singing  
spelling pedantry  
work

Isabel's own entry fills four-and-a-half columns; that of her mother, one-and-a-half.

Alain de Botton replied to my enquiry as to who compiled this index:

The index in my book was not all my own work by any means. I just suggested some subjects — all the more playful ones — and then a Macmillan/Picador indexer set to work and did the rest.

'The more playful subjects'? These perhaps indicate teasing entries that lure the reader to turn to the text referred to, and may include:

bathroom, activities in  
cockroach, in water glass  
cuddles  
friendship, after sex  
geographical deficiency  
insults, self-inflicted

louche males  
shipwreck, usefulness in  
sitting positions  
whole hog, going

and subheadings under Rogers, Isabel Jane

half-losing virginity  
losing virginity

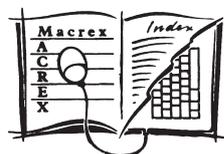
I asked the publisher (in March 1999) for the name of the chief indexer of this book, but was told that as the book was published in 1995 they had no record of who the indexer was. Alas. But as an index to a hybrid fiction/biography, this must be reckoned a most interesting example of our craft.

### Acknowledgements

All extracts from *Kiss and tell* are quoted here by kind permission of the author.

---

*Hazel Bell is a freelance indexer and was editor of The Indexer from 1978 to 1995. Email: hkbell@dial.pipex.com*



## MACREX INDEXING PROGRAM

[www.macrex.com](http://www.macrex.com)

MACREX has been under continuous development for over 18 years and is the program of choice of prestigious professional indexers worldwide. To keep in constant touch with our users, and to help us to continue to improve the program, we run an online discussion group where MACREX users from all over the world can compare notes and give and receive advice.

- **SAVE TYPING TIME:** MACREX includes numerous short cuts for typing entries and has extensive editing facilities allowing changes to be made at any point during the production of the index
- **ENSURE CONSISTENCY** by setting up style sheets for each project
- **SAVE WORK** by automatically producing indexes in different styles or in different media from one source file
- **CUT COSTS** by creating cumulations and updates with minimum re-keying of text
- **ACCELERATE** large projects by dividing work between several indexers and merging files
- **EASE DEADLINES:** indexes can be compiled before final pagination has been decided
- **TRANSFER FILES** between MACREX and major word-processors, databases, DTP systems, etc.
- **MONITOR PROGRESS:** MACREX records time taken indexing, entries per page, references per entry, etc.
- **AVOID LAST MINUTE PANIC:** changes to style, pagination, alphabetization, etc. can be accomplished in seconds

There are versions of MACREX for Microsoft Windows™ 3.1, 95, 98 and NT and DOS.

For more details contact:

*Head Office:*

MACREX INDEXING SERVICES  
Beech House  
Blaydon Burn  
Tyne & Wear, NE21 6JR, England  
phone 0191 414 2595; fax 414 1893  
email: [sales@macrex.com](mailto:sales@macrex.com)

*for North America (USA and Canada):*

MACREX SUPPORT OFFICE  
P.O. Box 3051, Daly City  
CA 94015  
USA  
phone 650-756-0821; fax 650-757-1567  
email: [macrex@aol.com](mailto:macrex@aol.com)

*for Australasia and South-East Asia:*

MASTER INDEXING  
44 Rothesay Avenue, East Malvern,  
Vic. 3145  
Australia  
phone and fax (03) 9571 6341  
email: [mindexer@interconnect.com.au](mailto:mindexer@interconnect.com.au)