

An index for Thalia*

Hazel K. Bell

Deliberately humorous indexes have been much featured through the volumes of this journal, those to *The Stuffed Owl: an anthology of bad verse*, A. P. Herbert's mock-legal volumes, Patrick Barlow's *All the world's a globe*, and that in Nabokov's *Pale Fire* being outstanding examples. The comic Pantheon of indexing grows; a *Sunday Telegraph* review of Julian Barnes's *Letters from London 1990–1995* (Picador, 1995) declared: 'the index alone is so funny that it's worth the cover price of the book'.

Letters from London reproduces Barnes's reports as London correspondent to the *New Yorker*, political and partial. He is a supremely witty writer in several genres, and has employed particular techniques here to produce an index of high comedy. It is fascinating to see how cleverly – and selectively – Barnes has contrived his index entries from passages of text. Let us examine some, and their sources.

One essay opens:

Last month I took part in a fund-raiser for a cash-strapped Oxford college: two poets, two prose writers and two musicians were the evening's entertainment. . . . The organizer began by apologizing for the fact that my advertised fellow-novelist was at the last minute unavoidably unable to make it (he had unavoidably gone skiing, but the fictioneers' free-masonry does not permit me to finger him).

Indeed, anonymity is at this point preserved. But, resorting to the index, we find an entry with one sole reference:

McEwan, Ian: unavoidably goes skiing

In an article on the World Chess Championship, Barnes frequently quotes Cathy Forbes's biography, *Nigel Short: quest for the crown*. Among the items gleaned from it is that Short's coach

also pays attention to the regulation of his charge's bodily functions. After Short has let off steam by playing his guitar before a game, Kavalek will remind him to empty his bladder.

This leads to the following index entry for the author (with no mention of the biography):

Forbes, Cathy: urinary pattern of Nigel Short

The passage

Poet Laureate Ted Hughes obliged with [as a special Election Day poem] a jocose number about the effect of toxic chemicals on the sperm count of Western males

is précised in the index as:

Hughes, Ted: gonadic appeal

'Vote for Glenda!' is a 37-page essay on Glenda Jackson's career change from films to politics. Her Conservative opponent as parliamentary candidate is quoted as saying: 'With Conservatives she's very unpopular. . . . If she were a

little more cuddly, she would convert more Tories'. Among her eight-line index entry appears:

Jackson, Glenda: not cuddly enough?

In a 36-page essay on Margaret Thatcher's ousting from the Conservative leadership, Barnes quotes a journalist claiming 'to have observed a "tragic drama" rooted in Mrs Thatcher's "Nietzschean will"', and comments: 'perhaps what occurred was less close to Shakespeare and Nietzsche than it was to a marriage that runs out of steam'. This is noted in the index as:

Nietzsche: possibly relevant to Mrs Thatcher's fall

Of Thatcher's memoirs, *The Downing Street years*, he notes what he finds as significant omissions from the index, including 'the name of a British subject sentenced to death by a foreign power during her premiership. . . . Bad luck, Citizen Rushdie.' So, in Barnes's index we have:

Rushdie, Salman: plight fails to stir Mrs Thatcher

Quoting Charles Dickens's description of Mrs Newnham in *Sketches by Boz*, Barnes suggests that 'Mrs Newnham's modern-day equivalent on the Chatham Winter Coal and Soup Distribution Society is Dr Mary Archer, who chairs the Hardship Committee'. This leads to the sole entry for Dickens in the index:

Dickens, Charles: creates precursor to Mary Archer

Barnes's own opinions are shrewdly reinforced in the index, in truly partial style. The sentence 'The British have managed to export some surprising things – cricket, marmalade, the humour of Benny Hill . . .' yields, in the index:

Hill, Benny, mysterious exportability of

Tracing the course of the 1992 General Election, Barnes lets fall:

Not even Andrew Lloyd Webber's threat to leave the country in the event of a Labour victory had persuaded enough people to vote for Neil Kinnock.

Salt is rubbed into the wound in the index:

Lloyd Webber, Andrew: threat to leave the country if Labour elected fails to make enough people vote Labour

Barnes does not care for Lady Thatcher. A column-long entry following her name includes:

rumours of lunacy; receives electric shocks in bath; 'bawls like a fishwife'; accused of war crimes; new version of St Augustine; how not to make the poor richer; discovers it's a funny old world; compared to Hamlet's father; compared to Catherine the Great; bursts into flame; omnipresence; effect on carol singers; unimpressed by the French Revolution

For some index entries, it is the straight-faced lack of comment that enchants:

*Thalia was the Greek Muse of Comedy.

Bruno, Frank: almost hurts Mike Tyson; stars in Aladdin
Heseltine, Michael: a rich blonde
Kasparov, Gary: psychological bruiser
Lloyd's of London: 'HIV of the upper-middle classes'
Philip, Prince, Duke of Edinburgh: given to ducal gaffes; whispered mistresses
Ridley, Nicholas: assorted gaffes

Other entries tell their own sad tale:

Howe, Sir Geoffrey: loyal Thatcherite; sacked by Mrs Thatcher; very dull; disloyal Thatcherite; biting doormat; booted around by European colleagues
Major, John: not renowned for flair; makes a joke; denounced as dull; satirist's nemesis; dwindling allure
Meyer, Sir Anthony: sacrificial rabbit, twittering canary or stalking-horse?
Trelford, Donald: condemns stories about Royals; prints story about Royals

Classification leads to some splendidly cumulative index paragraphs, such as:

Alcohol: Liebfraumilch and Ron Brown MP; champagne and Ron Brown MP; sparkling wine and Ron Brown MP
Animals: Mrs Thatcher as she-elephant; Geoffrey Howe as rabbit; Geoffrey Howe as Rottweiler in drag; Michael Heseltine as hornet

Brown, Ron, MP: parliamentary record; sexual record; criminal record
sheep: Geoffrey Howe; Andrew Neil; Lloyd's investors

A delightful index indeed. Nevertheless, one would not rest content with reading only the index, despite the comment by the *Sunday Telegraph*. After reading these subheadings under 'sex', who could refrain from turning to the pages cited?

lesbian panto; the case of Nona's knickers; and the Royal Family; Britannia's bra size; Claudia Schiffer's satanic breasts; Duke of Edinburgh; British taste for sodomy; how the English achieve pregnancy; Tony Blair

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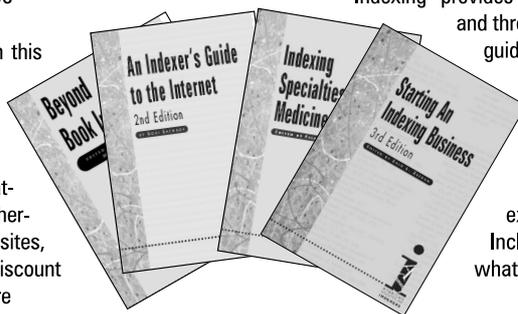
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