

Indexing fiction: a story of complexity

Considers the problems and benefits of preparing indexes to fiction, with reference to the novels of A.S. Byatt.

Fiction is approached by its readers in many ways — enjoyed, reviewed, studied, analysed, criticized—rarely, however, indexed. Why not? The necessity to provide indexes for any serious works of nonfiction that are likely to be consulted or reread has long been established. Both these criteria apply equally to good fiction. So why is so little of it indexed?

The indexing of fiction has indeed been undertaken from time to time. There are three major types of such indexes: at one extreme the seriously informative, dictionary-type, consolidated indexes to such major, in quality and quantity, works as those of Proust, Hardy and Dickens. These may extend to dictionaries of characters, and such complete expositions as Hilary Spurling's detailed and valuable guide to works of art, places, characters and events in her *Handbook to Anthony Powell's Music of time*.¹ At the other extreme lies the 'index as game' *jeu d'esprit*, as in Clive James's *Brilliant creatures*,² Malcolm Bradbury's *Mensonge*,³ Perec's *Life: a user's manual*⁴ — intended mainly to coruscate and amuse—and indeed amusing indexers immensely. Between these types lie serious, individual novels which might be indexed in the same way as biographies or histories, as narratives concerning groups of people.

In the October 1989 issue of *The Indexer*, Philip Bradley surveyed 'Indexes to works of fiction: the views of producers and users on the need for them', concluding, 'Indexes to fiction ... on the whole are not wanted by novelists, reviewers, readers or publishers ... there was a feeling that novels are not the sort of books that need to be indexed'.⁵ In our following issue Anthony Raven retorted, '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'.⁶ There are indeed those who require indexes to fiction.

I turned to the indexing of works of fiction unsolicited, on the pleasure principle. If I must lend so much attention to a text, I wanted it to be a worthwhile and rewarding one. I looked for novels so complex and loaded with ideas as well as characters as to need helpful adjuncts — and fell on the books of A.S. Byatt.

The texts in hand

Two of her novels in particular, *The virgin in the garden*⁷ and *Still life* met all my criteria. These are the first two of a planned sequence of four, with recurrent characters, and so much meet for indexing besides—so many references to D.H. Lawrence, such unexpected references to *King Lear*, such obscure ones as Mercurius, Caedmon, Heard, such scholarly disquisitions on language and metaphor, perception of colour, the first Elizabethan age. The books combined fascinating readability and imaginative grip with such intellectual complexity as to require indexes to unravel the elements of fiction, history, social history, art, aesthetics, images, symbols, themes, all so integrally merged. And the novels were large—the first had 428 pages, the second 358.

The virgin in the garden is set in North Yorkshire in 1952—3, Coronation Year. The plot concerns the Festival production of a play about Elizabeth I, allowing consideration of that period and of the problems of modern poetic language. The underlying theme is of metamorphosis, birth and death. There is social history as a record of the 1950s; treatment of one character involves the problems of the graduate housewife. *Still life* extends its scene to France, Cambridge University, and London, with the devising of a play about Van Gogh as one major theme, involving consideration of his—and all—art. The weight, length, seriousness and

complexity of these novels made them fit works for indexing.

I found the work of indexing them so fascinating, indeed, that I went on to index Byatt's other books; her earlier two, *Shadow of a sun*,⁹ about a girl growing up dominated by her famous novelist father, and *The game*,¹⁰ the story of two sisters of different characters and careers with recurring patterns of events, set in Northumberland, Oxford University and London; and the Booker Prize winner for 1990, *Possession*.¹¹ This last is an extraordinarily complex work, concerned basically with biographical research, so that the truth is discovered and the narrative proceeds by careful reading of early papers of all sorts. Diaries, letters, stories written by the characters, even their poetry (not a form I had previously indexed!) all carry the story forward, as the scholars in the novel as well as its readers switch back and forth among eras.

The indexing trouble with fiction...

My indexing experience was chiefly with biographies, where the chief difficulty is caused by the number of entries relating to major characters; how one should express and arrange them.^{12 13} I wondered how far the same techniques would be applicable to indexing fiction, or what new problems this type of text might bring. Bradley had also considered the problems of indexing fiction in recounting his experience in preparing an index to the Waverley novels of Sir Walter Scott:¹⁴ he found these to arise chiefly from lack of standardization of page numbers, chapter numbering, spelling and nomenclature in different editions of the same works. I found far more abstract coils of difficulty in indexing fictional rather than historic lives.

Richness of content

At the simplest, characters in fiction may be drawn from a wider range of social worlds than is likely to occur in a biography. In the *Virgin in the garden* sequence mingle teachers, pupils, dramatists, clergy, art lovers, housewives and a madman. Fiction also extends further than normal biography into the sexual lives of its characters, both in vividness of description and in degree of physical intimacy portrayed. 'Sleeps with' was a recurring subheading—perhaps a palely restrained one. 'With' might include the meaning, 'in bed with'. I had to use new subheadings with characters—'conception' as the first entry in a chronological sequence for two of the children, very clearly designated. Babies were important in the stories, mostly for their effects on the lives of their mothers, but they needed new subheadings for baby life. All human life was here indeed.

Biographers and historians rarely give long thought sequences, or detailed dreams, of their subjects, but these occur often in fiction; historians know less of their characters, and tell us less, than the authors of fiction who create their own characters, possessing total knowledge of them, so can fully present both their inner and outer lives.

Publications about indexing usually proclaim its function as being the locating of information items in documents. Fictional works contain very much more than mere information, the usual quarry of indexers.

The text of these novels was far more complex than that of biography also because of the amount going on in each scene; as well as basic plot development (corresponding to the development of the career of the main character in a biography) there were always developing relationships, images, symbols, themes, with their significance to be interpreted and a suitable means of recording them devised. It was often difficult to devise a single subheading to cover even one paragraph for one character: to select one aspect as the term of the subheading might be to dismiss several other possible ones. Should one take as most

significant the scene of a social event, or the occasion, or occurrences at it, or the development of relationships there?

Indexers are supposed to select only 'significant' items from the text for listing in the index. How to determine significance, in such rich, detailed, widely allusive writing, is perplexing indeed. Stephanie, restricted in *Still life* to home-making and child-rearing, 'became obsessed with growing things'. A page describes in detail her garden and gardening, her year-old son crawling around sabotaging the work, vegetables produced and consumed, climbing nasturtiums, beautifully portrayed in bloom, bringing suggestions of 'Jack and the Beanstalk, the prosaic and angry mother who had been given a few seeds in exchange for a cow and had stood at the foot of a brilliant ladder into the sky'. Dense writing indeed from which to pick out indexing terms! For main entries I selected 'gardening' but not 'Jack and the Beanstalk'; under Stephanie's entry, 'growing things'; under son Will's, this page reference was subsumed under 'babyhood'; under 'flowers', a recurrent theme that already had several various subheadings ('design; hermaphrodite; naming; of Flanders; sunflowers; in Pooles' playroom; painted by Van Gogh; baby recognizes'), I added, 'grown by Stephanie'. Some of the first nasturtiums, 'not pinched out early enough, wilted and died on long string-like stalks like tangled spaghetti'. Ten pages later we find, 'The germ of this novel was a fact which was also a metaphor: a young woman, with a child, looking at a tray of earth in which unthinned seedlings on etiolated pale stalks died in the struggle for survival

Nasturtium, Giant Climbing, mixed'. So 'nasturtiums' and 'seedlings' also had to be entered as significant main headings from the earlier gardening passage, though carrots and radishes, equally prominent there, were omitted from the index.

The subtlety and complexity of the literary form make it particularly difficult to devise headings that fully convey 'aspect' or 'comment'—what is said—rather than mere 'aboutness' or 'topic'—what is referred to—as differentiated by Weinberg.⁵ To resort to 'aboutness' subheadings, notational only, of the type, 'at Whitby' or 'in Ellen's journal', would be much the easiest course, but, as well as conveying very little of the contents of the novels, would have the effect of reducing the text to inappropriately discrete items of information. Full 'aspect' headings require specific indication of what happened at the place or in the journal; a brief and suitable précis of events or developments.

Yet even so, selection implies an incongruous reduction of significance. Mrs Orton, Stephanie's mother-in-law, lives with Stephanie's family for several strained months. Finally young Will causes a domestic accident with his toy train; the grandmother falls, breaks her hip, departs forever in an ambulance, loading Will with guilt and uttering her final bitter words to the long-suffering Stephanie, all in a page. Each member of the family has a subheading under their index entry to indicate this episode. Mrs Orton's could have been expressed several different ways, to emphasize different aspects. Her accident and departure seemed the most crucial aspects for her; I chose 'accident' as that implied the departure it caused, and all the rest. Such reductions of meaning to a single word or phrase for the index do seem incongruous, though. They compare with technical manual headings, 'ozone concentration', 'peracetic acid' much as- road signs, 'car park' or 'toilets' contrast with 'Cathedral', in the difference of the richness they promise to lead to. Similarly, 'first meeting alone; first kiss' in the entries for the long-dead lovers in *Possession* seem dreadfully worn clichés to lead to passages of such originality and power; entries not worthy of the work, concise and accurate though they are.

The significance of the text may simply overload the index term, not to be conveyed in the index. The boy Marcus, after an experiment in telepathy in church during Stephanie's

wedding to the staunch, physically and morally huge vicar, Daniel, cannot rid himself of eidetic visions. His tormented gaze falls on Daniel's massive back at the chancel, clerical-black; 'Black absorbed light and did not reflect it. Black gave out radiant heat: it was dark and warm. The lines of energy

went into that solid flesh and ceased'. I felt that **BLACK** must appear in the index, especially as colours and **LIGHT** were already entered; but an eager gloss, 'absorbent powers of or 'power' seemed to belittle it and diminish the power of the passage. I left a simple 'black 264', leaving readers to discover the full significance and complexity of the entry.

Difficulties with characters and names

Names in fiction are notional only. Bill Potter and Ted Orton in *Still life* are always so referred to; in life one would expand their names in the index to the 'real' William and Edward—but these have no 'reality'! This affected the alphabetical placing of several names between Bill and William, Edward and Ted. The Bishop of Calverley had to go crudely under B: no point in research to discover his name!

Biographies usually have one single central character; histories, a major figure, perhaps higher in rank, to whom all others can be related in the index (son of; secretary of). The Potter family in Byatt's novel sequence had five members, each important in the text, but with two sisters as the leading characters. Nevertheless, I designated characters in the index by their relationship to the paterfamilias, resenting the implied patriarchalism and false attribution of significance, but finding (daughter/son of Bill) for each shorter than describing Bill as (father of Stephanie, Frederica and Marcus), and Winifred (wife of Bill) shorter than (mother of. . .).

The two Victorian writers who are the subjects of research in *Possession* I treated quite seriously as if writers in normal biographies, subdividing their many subheadings into paragraphs for career, relics, letters, works. Their 'works' I listed in authentic indexing fashion, alphabetically, under their authors' names (by first line, when extracts only were quoted, untitled).

Characters of all sorts — historical, mythical, fictional, literary—mingled in the text with the larger, abstract themes. I saw no necessity to distinguish types of character typographically in the index, and let the Bishop, Robin Day, Elizabeth I and II Thomas Hardy, Jan Morris, Bill Potter, Marcel Proust, Sir Walter Raleigh, Mother Shipton, Venus, parade undifferentiated. A particularly delightful sequence was *Faerie Queene*, *The* (Spenser); Father Christmas (department store).

Multi-layered form

Characters in fiction are presented and interpreted in many various ways and at many levels. Whereas histories present all actions in direct narrative form (and, usually, sequence) or in letters and diaries, fiction may present its events also as recounted in characters' conversations, memories, thoughts or dreams; all of these may be given in close, significant detail. One must enter the occurrence of the conversation under all its participants, and enter the letters under the writers and recipients, as well as indexing the actual topics discussed or written of. Should one enter for a person only references to their actual appearances and actions in the novel, or also take as valid references mentions of them in the conversations, dreams or thoughts of others? The answer seemed to lie entirely with the degree of significance these held.

In *Possession* there was not only the complexity of the reinterpretation of earlier

stories and letters advancing the narrative, and constant change of time of the action; the letters themselves had three separate attributes for indexing. The events they described advanced the story—a romance developed originally in correspondence only. Then, the letters were also written productions of the two major characters, both authors, whose many literary works were listed at the end of their entries, and should include their letters. Thirdly, the physical papers containing the letters were the object of a quest through the novel, needing subheadings such as **DISCOVERED**, **STUDIED**, **MARKETED**, **BURIED IN GRAVE**.

So much that happens in these novels is implicit only, or comprehensible only in the light of later developments, that for some entries bald assumptions must be made. Piecing together the story of the 19th-century authors' romance in *Possession*, the researchers assume that the weeping lady at a seance was indeed Christabel, the subject of their study. This is never textually confirmed; but I listed **AT MRS LEE'S SEANCE** firmly under Christabel in the index, as with other unconfirmed assumptions in the books.

The structure of the whole, and the unity of each chapter, were deliberately engineered by a literary writer, in a way the factual recording of historic events does not need to be. Links had to be noticed and traced, and the hidden intentions of the designer of events had to be devised, in deciding where true emphasis should be placed, as in life they would be only in a theological context!

Problems of the devising and arrangement of subheadings for the several major characters in the books were as complex as those encountered in biographies—so many to devise, so many possibilities of arranging them:

alphabetically? in order of occurrence in the text? chronologically? subdivided by topic?

Since the order of the narrative was a deliberately contrived literary work, not a straight recounting of sequential events, the problem seemed to require a more delicate solution than the normal biography.

Subheadings in histories and biographies are usually arranged chronologically. In historical contexts, even dates have their own significance for the text (1066, 1914—18), without glosses or details being needed. In fiction, not only are most dates meaningless outside the context of the work, but the narrative is not always simply chronological. Flashbacks are a frequent form; memories and thoughts of characters play a large part. Often the content of the thought, as well as its occurrence ('remembers dead sister') needs to be indexed; two periods are simultaneously presented in the text: the time when someone is engaged in reflection, and the time they are remembering. The childhood of the characters in Byatt's books is presented chiefly in memories occurring during conversations. My biographical subheadings are chronologically arranged (beginning in two cases, as stated above, 'conception'), with 'childhood' an early one; but this chronological order usually does not coincide with page order, as it does in indexes to histories. Establishing chronological order for subheadings under the 19th-century characters whose lives are later investigated in *Possession* took a great deal of disentanglement!

Language fit for literature

Current indexing practice, as enjoined by the most recent British Standard on indexing, abjures the inclusion of the definite article in indexes, and encourages the omission of prepositions in subheadings. This may result in indexes that rap out basic elements of information in staccato fashion, meant for scanning and consultation rather than reading. The absence of prepositions produces a vague suggestion of connection, 'related in some way to'. I felt that the language of the indexes for novels must flow in natural reading fashion; I was not attempting to boil down the text and extract basic information items, but to mirror its text in miniature and guide readers through a beautifully realized world of characters and ideas. The terms used should match the text in precision, too. For example, *The virgin in the garden* shows Frederica reflecting on 'her behaviour with, and with regard to, Alexander'—a most careful and deliberate choice of prepositions. Standardization, also much advocated nowadays for indexing, is opposed to subtlety and differentiation. For this index I used in subheadings 'attitude to; view of;

with; relationship with' as each seemed appropriate, regardless of which had been used in somewhat similar entries. 'Teacher at! teaching at'—one term may indicate a career stage, the other an activity engaged in on that page. As a subheading, 'at William's birth' indicates 'at the time of; in the situation caused by', rather than 'present at'. 'And', despised by some in subheadings, can cover at once several aspects of relationship or dealings with, as well as the presence of the other party, or thoughts about them, and avoid *excluding* any aspect; it is a useful conjunction if several of these elements are relevant at the same time, and none should be excluded.

On the other hand, use of the same subheading to cover several passages of the text may clumsily mask a subtle variation in apparently similar passages. After the first performance of *Astraea* in *The virgin in the garden*, an argument develops among twelve named people. In a biography, probably one could repeat for each of them the subheading, 'after first performance of *Astraea*'. With fiction, where the life and development of each individual character is separately, imaginatively presented, each may need a different description of that episode according to the significance it holds for them.

The selection of terminology requires value-judgements. The boy Marcus and his biology teacher conduct experiments with supernatural forces. Does one list these as religion; telepathy; madness; spiritualism; occult? The author's intentions and attitudes must be divined and reflected in the vocabulary used.

Developing themes

The themes were abstract and complex, and quite differently treated among different characters and scenes of the novel. One of the more abstract and dispersed entries, **COLOURS**, is, for *The virgin in the garden*: colours: in *Astraea* 102; Elizabethan significance 111—12; Festival of Britain 66; Simmonds' madness

401; Wilkie's optical experiments 130—followed by, in *Still life*: seen by baby 107—8; names of 108, 163—4; Wedderburn thinks of 69—70; discussed at beach party 75, 79—80; in Pooles' flat 171—4; in Van Gogh's paintings 2, 69—70; to Van Gogh 79, 84, 109, 167; in *The yellow chair* 166—7, 3 10-12

How far to index symbols and metaphors became a very delicate question. Spiders, for instance, occur in *Possession* as natural species for study beneath a microscope; in the wild on Yorkshire Moors; and many times as symbols for the fierce female writer in the book. Such clear references I listed in the index; but hesitated at the faint suggestion and echo, such as the researcher walled in by filing cabinets, guarding her treasured papers, denying access to a querying colleague who fears the answer he seeks 'may have fallen through her web of categories'. There are recurrent apples, golden and natural, mythical and real, echoes and implications. It seemed too crude to point out gleefully each suggestion of resemblance, each image, each tiny mention. One must recognize the leitmotif, but not catalogue it exhaustively.

A difficulty has been that only the first two of the proposed sequence of four novels have yet been published, and I have no idea what is to occur in their sequels. While indexing *Still life* I realized that some entries I had not included in the index to *The virgin in the garden*, because they seemed too trivial (books by Beatrix Potter and Georgette Heyer, Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers'), should in fact have been listed, as they recurred or were more deeply developed in the second novel. Frederica's brief, inept attempt at teaching in *Still life* is worth including under T only because it contrasts with the several competent teachers in her immediate circle shown in the first book. Two schoolgirls, Ruth and Jacqueline, indexed thus under R and J, become important in the second novel, and I am sure will feature further in the third, and be accorded surnames. Colour perception, as shown above, proved a major theme of the second novel, having already featured differently in the first.

Indexing this sequence of novels is cumulative indexing, blind as to what may be to come.

Unexpected light was thrown on the whole *opus* of Byatt in finding how many of the same headings—not those expected—recurred among the unrelated novels. Cambridge University, Coleridge, D.H. Lawrence, places in North Yorkshire, Venus, various forms of snakes, seemed to recur almost in each book, indicating authorial preoccupations.

The sledge-hammer and the butterfly

Some authors consulted by Bradley objected to the idea of fiction being indexed, as this would destroy its magic.⁵ The literary indexer may indeed feel in danger of philistinism, opposed to literacy. Providing an index to a book may attempt two effects: to avoid people's having to read the book through to come across its contents in the order designed by the author; and to reduce the whole to very much less than the sum of its parts, rearranged on some alternative basis. Information retrieval sees books merely as collections of facts to be selected from the store or ignored, unrelated to the remainder; by, how revealingly, an end-user, not a reader. Technical books may even sometimes be indexed by computer systems that cannot of course 'read'—appreciate—the book: truly a mindless task. Literary indexers, at the other extreme, should value the book in hand as the finished work of the author's imagination, an aesthetic unity with its own rhythm, pace and pattern, which should all contribute to its effect. Do we aim to reduce a chiming clock to tidy piles of metal pieces; elegant buildings to stones and mortar, neatly laid in rows? How much greater a thing it is to compile than to analyse—almost, we might say, to create than to destroy. Perhaps these are the reasons for the indifference, almost hostility, to indexes that authors have sometimes displayed—that they find it painful to see their so carefully assembled spells efficiently unravelled by us, the harmony shattered?

I can only plead that I indexed these books because they seemed so wonderfully full of good things and ideas, and that the more closely I examined them, the more wonderful they appeared. I tried to avoid reducing flowing text to discrete bits of information, and hoped that rearranging the juxtapositions of past and present chronologically for the index was enlightening, not destructive. Elements of mystery, undeniably, cannot survive indexing: a charming child's riddle quoted I listed under its solution, 'egg'; and to read the index before the text would indeed negate the sheer shock of the sudden death of one heroine. But consulting the index to such books *before* the text should be deplored anyway!

If indexes are to be held suitable adjuncts to any texts, to enable location of specific passages and collate dispersed references to the same theme, then surely fiction that is serious, lengthy and complex is at least as deserving of these aids to study and research as any other form of writing. The indexes are intended to help people find again their particular favourite passages. Among my own are the English lesson given by Stephanie on the *Ode on a Grecian urn*, and the descriptions of the butcher's shop, decorated in discordant modes, 'representing the English concord and harmony of veal, ham and egg' in *The virgin in the garden*; the baby feeding, where 'apple was becoming baby, fruit was going into flesh' in *Still life*; and stories and poems by the writers in *Possession*. The indexes also bring together dispersed references to the same subject—such as the plays of Shakespeare, or discussions of spiritualism — to see how they are gradually developed, or throw light upon each other. For such scholarly novels as these, that may well be studied in literature classes, students may find indexes helpful. The indexes are an optional supplement to the texts, never, oh Good Lord, *never* a substitute.

Conclusion

The intellectual range of these novels is peculiar to their very scholarly author, but indexing them illustrates many problems that would apply to indexing fiction in general. First, all those difficulties already recognized as applying to the indexing of biographies as narrative prose about people: length of text, extended continuity, selection and terminology of entries, arrangement and number of subheadings, run-on layout. Further problems arising from the indexing of fictional text are the number of characters simultaneously focused on; the presentation of their thought processes, memories and dreams; the juxtaposition of past and present non-sequentially; revelation of past events only gradually by hints; subtle implication rather than explicit statement; the inclusion of symbols, images and abstract themes; and the need to divine—and not to bludgeon or distort — the fundamental intentions of the creative author.

Should such indexing be done? Not for all fiction, I would say; only the serious, complex, densely written. The resulting indexes to such works must be helpful to students and to selective rereaders; even to the author

continuing a sequence. The indexes may be some indication of the serious status of the books. And to the indexer, the work is fascinating: one reads the text repeatedly and closely; and indexing becomes a form—albeit humble — of literary criticism.

(And what is to happen to the indexes? Well, nothing, actually. A. S. Byatt herself writes that she ‘can’t persuade publishers that an index doesn’t look like boasting/pretension/offputting academicism’.)

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