

Strange purposes of indexes

Hazel Bell

Judy Batchelor, writing in this journal in 1989, dubbed the index to Malcolm Bradbury's (1987) novel, *My strange quest for Mensonge*, 'an anti-index, in which the signifier refuses absolutely to relate to the signified'; and that to Lucy Ellmann's (1988) novel, *Sweet desserts*, a para-index: 'a guide not to the overt topics but to its subtext and its personal connotations'. She concluded her article:

Innovation in indexing is powerfully to be encouraged; the non-index and the sub-index have been with us for many years, and we may now perhaps look forward to the meta-index, the *sur-index* and who knows what further developments.

That time seems now to be upon us, to judge from some examples of indexes – all of them, again, to works of fiction – that have come to our attention.

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First, let us consider Milorad Pavić's *Landscape painted with tea*. This was first published in Yugoslavia, translated into French, then translated and published in the USA by Knopf in 1990, and in the UK by Hamilton in 1991. The table of contents shows six numbered chapters in Book One, 'A Little Night Novel'. Each chapter 'title' is a transcription in italics of the opening 15 or so words of the chapter. Book One is followed on page 99 by Book Two, 'A Novel for Crossword Fans' – not mentioned in the table of contents, and with no table of contents of its own.

Book Two starts with two small, enigmatic crosswords, and its half-titles and chapter titles are variations on the words 'Across' and 'Down'. This continues to page 338; the index is a single page, 339. Page 340 is blank; pages 341 and 342 have horizontal lines printed across them, with nothing else but the heading: 'Space left for the reader to write in the denouement of the novel or the solution to this crossword'. The heading on page 343 is 'Solution', and beneath it is printed, upside down, seven lines, two sentences, which presumably are the solution, but which I cannot explain.

The index has a headnote:

For practical reasons, all the words in this index are given in the form in which they are used in the book.

and only 53 entries (in 3 columns), of which 31 consist of single words, each with a single page reference; the other 22 are of this type:

a, *passim*
and, *passim*
are, *passim*
you, *passim*
your, *passim*

Tony Raven, a professional indexer, examined this index and found the utility of even these few entries debatable. 'For example, the entry "pencil, p. 282" leads to this passage'

The back cover, like the front, has a drawing. Here again architect Razin dipped his pencil in tea. In hemlock tea.

There is no index entry for Razin, hemlock, or anything else on page 282.

Perhaps the truth is, these index entries constitute clues towards the solving of the crossword, rather than aids to location of items in the text?

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Then there is the index provided for *The sinking of the Odradek Stadium* by Harry Mathews, who was born in New York and became a member of the *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* (Oulipo), a surrealist post-war Parisian literary movement in the early 1970s. He is the author of five novels and several volumes of poems, translations and criticism.

The sinking of the Odradek Stadium was first published in a journal, *The Paris Review*, in 1971–2, then survived 25 rejections before finding a publisher for book form – Harper & Row, in 1975, then Carcanet in 1985. It is told almost entirely in the form of letters between Zachary McCaltex and his bride. According to 'The Complete Review' website: 'The story twists, skips and jumps . . . Mathews mixes politics, literature, music, and the personal . . . There is also a lot of literary play. . . . Mathews displays his craftiness . . .'

Edmund White wrote of this novel, in *The New York Times Book Review*:

The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium seems to me . . . as intricate as Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Mathews . . . has moved away from pearls of exotic narration strung on a slender thread of continuity. In [this book] he has created a seamless fabric, as tense, light, and strong as stretched silk.

Here is an early passage from the text, *sic*:

Pan persns knwo base bal. The giappan-like trade-for mishn play with it in our capatal any times. To morrow to work begin. It's cleen eccepts for the talk. The in-habits live in draems.

The book's 200 pages include a four-page index. Our professional indexer, examining it by conventional criteria, reported: 'the index seems to be serious – that is to say, not intentionally funny'. He found many entries in the index not to be present in the text, or not recognizably. Most entries were for names – even the most trivial mentions of names get an index entry. There is a reference in the text to a ship, the *Odradek Stadion*, *sic*, but with no index entry – for that, or for the eponymous *Odradek Stadium*. There are long strings of page references: Hodge, Dexter, has about 50.

So, conventionally judged, this index is a dud. But the website reviewer comments:

There's also an index to the novel (we approve heartily!), as cleverly done as the rest of the novel for anyone who cares to follow it. (In fact, it helps in the understanding of some of the allusions in the text that might otherwise be missed.)

The text indeed appears in need of such help – but this is hardly the normal function of an index as we know it. Do we have here the meta-index or *sur*-index that Batchelor foresaw?

* * *

House of leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski runs to 710 pages: 13 pages of introduction, 535 of text, followed by three appendices and a 42-page, triple-column index. The Amazon blurb for the book states:

Danielewski uses an arsenal of post-modern and avant-garde techniques, from multiple typefaces, footnotes and collage to the insertion of photographs, sketches, a page of Braille, and even an index. . . . freely unites avant-garde and popular art forms. . . . *House of Leaves* has already been compared to the film *The Blair Witch Project* for its mix of pseudo-documentary and genre horror.

Bret Easton Ellis reviewed this book as: 'Thrillingly alive, sublimely creepy, distressingly scary, breathtakingly intelligent – it renders most other fiction meaningless.' As for the meaningfulness or otherwise of the index – all its entries consist of single words, with no subheadings. Lines of page-numbers extend down the columns. The entry for 'again' has a 9-cm-deep block (rather than string) of page references; 'all' has 11 cm; 'back' has 11; 'can' has 13. I wondered whether this might be in fact a concordance rather than an index, and looked up in the index each word occurring in the first line of the text – no, they are not all listed in the index.

Some entries appear mysteriously thus, exactly:

aggressor . . . DNE
arterial . . . DNE
ballerina . . . DNE

Could this signify Do Not Enquire? An anti-index? I can provide no theory as to the indented use of this index.

* * *

Bestseller by Olivia Goldsmith runs to 507 pages. It tells the story of an editorial Cinderella – underpaid, overworked in a cramped office and unappreciated at a wickedly managed publishing house. Her virtues are finally trumpeted in *Publishers Weekly*, while she becomes editor in chief at a new 'boutique publisher'.

Goldsmith knows every trick of the publishing trade of which she is writing, having worked in it herself. The three pages of acknowledgements begin with:

So many people contributed to this book that I had to put together an index. (I hope all of you actually read the book, but if you only want to see your name mentioned, just consult the back.)

The disclaimer reads:

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. Though it contains incidental references to actual people and places, these references are used merely to lend the fiction a realistic setting. . . .

The index (triple-column, six pages) consists of names only, with no topics or subheadings. It is packed full of celebrity and publishing-world names to whet the appetite, as well as the names of characters in the novel – useless in an index without subheadings. The celebrity and professional names relate in different ways to the book. Each of the 110 chapters

is headed by an attributed quotation about writing or publishing – that accounts for the appearances of such as Margaret Atwood and Graham Greene in the index. Then there are text passages carefully contrived to yield interesting index entries, such as:

Years at the library reading Flaubert, Turgenev, Austen, Forster and the other greats had given Opal an informed and exquisite taste.

Now she found that she could write. Not as well as Beryl Bainbridge or Kay Gibbons or Anita Brookner, but . . .

I think it's like our *Hello* magazine. Rock stars and their wives, and endless stories on Paula Yates and Princess Caroline of Monaco.

These celebrity names all make their – surely superfluous – appearance in the index.

As for the final type of index entry here – I recognized various names of publishers and agents, and looked them up in the text. There seems to be no mention of them there. Goldsmith apparently means quite literally her address to her professional colleagues at the beginning of the acknowledgements: 'if [they] only want to see [their names] mentioned', they should indeed 'just consult the back'!

This index seems to be intended as an appetite-whetter, a marketing ploy – and the text devised in some measure to provide suitable matter for the index.

Each of these purported indexes to novels does seem to have an agenda of its own, quite separate from helping readers to locate passages of the text.

References

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When indexes don't sell books

Ken Livingstone [the mayor of London] ... was spotted at the Politico's bookstore with a new book on Neil Kinnock. Naturally he went straight for the index. Having digested the unflattering references to himself for 15 minutes, he put the book back and left without buying anything.

Andrew Pierce, 'People', *The Times*, 26 July 2002
