From the Reference Desk

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From the Reference Desk

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Facts On File has published a new, comprehensive 11-volume set covering American history from 1492 to the present. Under the general editorship of Gary B. Nash, the Encyclopedia of American History (2003, 081604371X, $99.35) conforms to the National Standards for United States History Project that Mr. Nash co-directed with Charlotte Crabtree. These 11 volumes are unified by a common index but are chronologically arranged according to the National Standards project timeline. Each volume is structured so it can stand alone and behave like a single volume subject encyclopedia. Each has individual editors, is arranged alphabetically, has its own index, a chronology, bibliography and basic primary documents relevant to the era covered.

The content is appropriate for high school students and first year undergraduates, as well as the general reader. The coverage is broad and inclusive. As you would expect, the articles deal with major events, people, movements and historic trends, as well as addressing topics as diverse as the arts, culture, politics and the economy. With its chronological arrangement, the Encyclopedia of American History enables the reader to focus on a specific time frame or era, and by browsing through the volume get a sense of the concurrent events, personalities and issues. And at the same time, a number of subjects are treated repeatedly so that the reader can trace topics like population trends, medicine, religion and popular culture as they evolve through the eras covered. The articles are thorough and factually balanced. Some 750 photographs and 200 useful maps illustrate the text and each article has a list of further readings. See also references are in capital letters in the text of the articles, as well as at the end of the articles.

Thoughtfully designed, up-to-date and reader-friendly, the Encyclopedia of American History is a natural complement to the recent Gale revision of the classic Scribner reference source, the Dictionary of American History (2002, 0684805332, $995). Public libraries, as well as academic and many high school libraries will want to place it on their short list.

Routledge has added two new titles to its Encyclopedias of the Middle Ages series. The most recent release is Medieval Iberia: an Encyclopedia (2003, 0415939186, $175) edited by E. Michael Cerri. Focusing on the Iberian peninsula, (present day Spain and Portugal), during the years 470 to 1500, this one-volume reference delves into an broad array of topics including arts, literature, culture, general history, philosophy, science and society. Individual article titles range from agriculture to animal fables to the Albigensian Crusade, from medicine to monasteries to marriage and from theater to textiles to taxation. The encyclopedia contains more than 800 articles. A number of the articles are short and descriptive containing from 250 to 500 words, but the majority, seem to be longer, and more interpretative, containing 500 to 3000 words. Each article is signed and has a brief bibliography. There is a general index but, unfortunately, there are no “see also” references or a thematic index, grouping related topics. For an encyclopedia with over 800 entries, this is an obvious shortcoming, especially from the vantage point of the novice student, or less informed scholar.

Nonetheless, Medieval Iberia: an Encyclopedia is a serious and sophisticated treatment, offering a broad and interdisciplinary approach to its topic. However, it is also unique, concentrating on a specific culture and locale within medieval history and allowing more specificity than larger, multi-volume encyclopedias like the Dictionary of the Middle Ages. This reference is also a timely entry to the literature. It speaks to the ever-increasing interest in Hispanic studies, and informs a fascinating area in medieval studies where the intermingles Muslim-Arab world on Western civilization, as well as that of Spain and Portugal, can be seen.

Edited by Norman Roth, Medieval Jewish Civilization: an Encyclopedia (2003, 0415937124, $150) is the next to last title in the series. The coverage is of Jewish civilization broadly interpreted, and covers arts, culture, language, history and law. On a more specific level, individual articles deal with topics ranging from Hebrew grammar to Hasidism, the Crusades to the Jewish Chronicles, Abraham bar Hayya to Louis IX and banking to folklore. There are also articles on Jewish contributions and experience in individual countries and regions from Asia to Palestine and from Poland to Valencia. While there are a number of contributors, Medieval Jewish Civilization is very much a production of Norman Roth, who is professor emeritus of Hebrew and Semitic studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Mr. Roth has written over 90 of the articles and they reflect his scholarly expertise. The organization of the book is reader friendly. Besides a general index, there is an alphabetical list of entries, a thematic list of articles, and see references in the text of the articles that provide access to the encyclopedia’s content. All of the articles have useful bibliographies.

While there are existing references that cover Jewish history and civilization, this encyclopedia fills a niche. None of the titles concentrate specifically on the medieval era. Academic libraries supporting Jewish studies, as well as medieval history, will want to consider this book.

ABC-CLIO has published two encyclopedias that address issues of perennial interest to students and lay readers alike. The first, Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture and the Law (2002, 1576072681, $185) is edited by sociologist Gregg Lee Carter, and the second, Literacy in America: An Encyclopedia of History, Theory and Practice (2002, 1576073580, $185) is edited by Barbara J. Guzzetti, professor of education at Arizona State University. Both titles should draw interest from public and academic libraries, as well as larger high school libraries.

Browsing through Guns in American Society reinforces an awareness of the pervasive-ness of guns in our culture, and throughout our history. Controversial issues from today’s headlines like gun control, drive-by shootings, poverty and gun violence, and Second Amendment rights are discussed, as are individual incidents of gun violence like the Texas Tower Shootings, Ruby Ridge, and of course the Columbine High School Tragedy. Balancing this, there are essays on legitimate gun uses like hunting, collecting, target shooting and self-defense. There are also articles on major organizations in the gun debate like the NRA, the Fraternal Order of Police and the Republican and Democratic parties, as well as individual players like Congressmen John Conyers, the NRA’s Walter La Pierre and shooting victim and activist, James Brady.

In addition, a number of articles add historical context. There are essays on topics like the Civil War and Small Arms, Frontier Violence, Dueling and the Article of Confederation and Gun Control as well as biographical sketches of historical figures like Eliphalet Remington II, Harry William Herbert, Annie Oakley and John Moses Browning. Rounding out the coverage are articles on relevant court cases, government agencies, influential media outlets, the gun laws of other nations and even specific gun models and types.

continued on page 66

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From the Reference Desk

From page 64

Authored by scholars and professionals in the field, *Guns in American Society* offers a serious and even-handed approach to this complex issue. The writing is factual, to the point and objective. There are also a number of useful features including up-to-date bibliographies, liberal use of "see also" references and a directory of organizations interested in gun issues. This two-volume set will have broad appeal, not only because of the enduring relevance of the topic, but because of the quality of the treatment provided.

*Literacy in America: An Encyclopedia of History, Theory and Practice* is also impressive. Grounded in the latest research and practice, *Literacy in America* employs a definition of literacy that is multifaceted, and includes reading, writing, listening and speaking literacy, as well as the "new literacies" of popular culture, media and technology. Some 260 entries, written by close to 250 contributors, make up this two-volume work. Intended for a broad audience of scholars, students, professionals and interested lay readers, this set aims at providing "definitions, processes, influences, issues types and theories of literacy" as one of its goals. In addition, editor Barbara J. Guzzetti and her contributors focus on methods of assessment and instruction, as well as offering articles on specific literacy resources and organizations. There is also coverage of professional publications and reports. However, the subtitle is somewhat misleading. The word "history" could have been left out. The history of the literacy movement receives little emphasis. There is one article on the history of reading instruction that offers historical context, but a sense of the history of the literacy movement does not come through in examining these volumes. This may be due to the fact that the literacy movement is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Nonetheless, *Literacy in America* is far stronger in its coverage of "theory" and "practice," and that is the real contribution of this work. It gathers together the current theory and practice of literacy education from the educator's perspective and, in fact, could function as a professional handbook. As you would expect from a high caliber scholarly work, each article has a list of relevant references while black and white photos and some charts and diagrams illustrate the text. In short, academic libraries supporting education courses, in particular, will find this a natural choice.

However, the cost of these two ABC-CLIO sets will give some pause. Both *Guns in American Society* and *Literacy in America* might have been published in single volumes, with the price reduced. Of course, that does not detract from their usefulness for libraries with needs in these two critical areas.

Another high interest and timely title is *Sage Publications Encyclopedia of Terrorism* (2003, 0761924086, $99.95) by Harvey W. Kushner. Mr. Kushner is the Chairman of the Criminal Justice Department at Long Island University and a frequent guest on CNN whose expertise is widely respected. His book reflects his thorough knowledge of the various types of terrorism and the groups and individuals, who make up the worldwide terror network. His encyclopedia names all of the usual suspects like Hezbollah, Al-Quada, and the Irish Republican Army, as well as lesser-known or moribund organizations like the Morazanist Patriotic Front in Honduras, Kahane Chai in Israel, and the Italian Ordine Nuovo. However, Kushner does not limit his coverage to political terrorism. He also includes essays on animal, environmental, antimilitarism and anti-supremacist terrorism. Counter terrorism is given its due with articles on government agencies like the Office of Homeland Security in the United States and military units like the elite German counter terrorism group, Grenzschutzgruppe, and Israel's Sayeret Matkal. There is also coverage of specific terrorist acts like the Munich Olympic Massacre, the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Achille Lauro hijacking, the bombing of Air India flight 182, and of course, the September 11th attack. Other entries offer brief biographies of known terrorists, discussions of concepts like jihad and phenomena like suicide terrorism and terrorist methods like kidnapping and hostage taking. Special features like a chronology of terrorism related events, a directory of relevant Websites and a guide/index of related topics are particularly helpful, and enhance the value of this work.

Authoritative and thorough, the *Encyclopedia of Terrorism* is a book that libraries and their patrons will welcome. It offers factual, well-written coverage of a topic both fascinating and disturbing, but ultimately important. This single volume encyclopedia is appropriate for both reference and circulating collections and should find a home in libraries of all types.