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Reference Interview - Ken Kister

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Reference Interview — Ken Kister

Freelance Writer, Tampa, FL

by Tom Gilson, (College of Charleston)

One of our aims in starting *From the Reference Desk*, was to provide a showcase for the ideas of people who throughout their careers have had an impact on the world of reference. In this issue, we have an interview with **Ken Kister**, who has been evaluating encyclopedias and other reference materials for over twenty years. Called "the Ralph Nader of Encyclopedias," Kister was educated at the Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science. His recent book, *Kister's Best Encyclopedias*, (Oryx, 1994) is the most comprehensive evaluation of encyclopedias available, and is a book with which any librarian responsible for selection should be familiar.

TG: What significant changes have you seen in encyclopedia publishing during the more than twenty years you have been reviewing encyclopedias?

KK: The first change that comes quickly to mind, Tom, is that the overall quality of encyclopedias has improved during that time. It seems to me there are less awful products around, most of the real duds having been exposed and, happily, sent to encyclopedia hell. That's not to say there still aren't bad encyclopedias out there, but I just don't see as many as I used to.

TG: What, in your opinion, Ken, accounts for this?

KK: Good question. A major force in the push for better encyclopedias has been ALA's **Reference & Subscription Books Committee** — now called the **Reference Books Bulletin Board**. The Board, which, as you know, publishes its reviews in *Reference Books Bulletin* found at the back of *Booklist*, has over the years developed criteria, or standards, by which all encyclopedias can be fairly judged — such standards as the need for high levels of accuracy, up-to-dateness, readability, ac-

cess to contents, and bibliographies accompanying articles. Most important, these standards have been generally accepted by all reputable encyclopedia publishers in North America. Publishers know that if they bring out a shoddy encyclopedia, reviewers at ALA and others like Kister will systematically apply these standards and condemn the work. Hence, across the board, we see more encyclopedias of higher quality and, conversely, less that fall short of minimum reference requirements.

TG: Any other changes occur to you?

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KK: Another change I've witnessed concerns the selling of encyclopedias. Specifically, there is much less consumer deception and fraud in encyclopedia sales today than there was 20 years ago. During the late 1970s, thanks largely to the efforts of an activist **Federal Trade Commission**, the major encyclopedia publishers finally got the message that unscrupulous sales practices would not be tolerated. At

that time, most of the major publishers — including **Grolier**, **Collier's**, and **Britannica** — were cited for deceptive trade practices after lengthy investigations. I check periodically with the FTC and the agency confirms that complaints about encyclopedia hucksterism have dropped dramatically during the past dozen or so years.

TG: What about the advent of electronic encyclopedias, both online and CD-ROM? How significant is this development?

KK: Obviously very significant. In fact, there's no doubt in my mind that the most important development in reference publishing since I've been reviewing has been the electronic, or digital, revolution. Clearly, electronic publishing is radically altering the face of contemporary encyclopedias and the entire encyclopedia business. To paraphrase an article I wrote in the May 1995 issue of *Wilson Library Bulletin* [see "Multimedia Encyclopedias Take Off, But How Far Will They Fly?"], not only is publication in electronic form changing the way we perceive encyclopedias, it's revolutionizing how they are edited, revised, manufactured, priced, sold, and ultimately used. In a nutshell, electronic encyclopedias are capable of delivering much more informational firepower than their print counterparts — while at the same time they often cost much less, which is pretty remarkable.

TG: So you've seen some major changes during your time as an encyclopedia reviewer ...

KK: Yes, and what's most encouraging to me, Tom, when I look back over the past twenty-plus years is that all of the changes we've mentioned are beneficial to encyclopedia consumers, which include librarians and their patrons. Over the years, my first goal has been to be a consumer advocate — to help consumers get the most for their encyclopedia dollar. Looking back,

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I'm gratified that some progress has been made.

TG: I want to follow up on something you said a minute ago — that electronic encyclopedias "deliver more informational firepower" than print encyclopedias. Could you clarify or expand on what you mean by "informational firepower"?

KK: As I've said, as far as encyclopedias are concerned, the coming of electronic publishing is unquestionably the most important new development to occur during my professional lifetime. However, I should point out that, like many librarians, I'm very much a print person. I've loved books from early on and continue to regard them as indispensable. Still, the fact remains that encyclopedias in electronic form offer users many features not possible in a print work. For example, Boolean and proximity searching, possible only in electronic publications, allows for much faster and more thorough retrieval of encyclopedic information than traditional indexes and cross-references. Another obvious example is multimedia — moving pictures and sound — which again is available only in electronic products, usually CD-ROM. Multimedia can add a powerful dimension to any encyclopedia, making its contents richer and deeper than the contents of a comparable print work. Electronic encyclopedias also have larger and more flexible storage capacities than print encyclopedias, and therefore possess the capability of providing more information than print encyclopedias, which are limited to so many pages and volumes. Electronic encyclopedias also hold out the potential for interactivity — that is, users can make choices, interpolate new data, and manipulate text to meet their individual needs. True interactivity isn't here yet, but it's not far down the road. This is what I mean by online and CD-ROM encyclopedias potentially offering the user more "informational firepower."

TG: Despite your professed love of books, you seem to be suggesting that print encyclopedias are an endangered species. Yes?

KK: Obviously no one has the definitive answer to the print versus electronic equation. There are those who argue passionately that the familiar book will never disappear, while others just as adamantly suggest the so-called "paperless" society is just around the corner. My instincts tell me that print publication will increasingly become subordinate to electronic forms — but that print will survive, that it will find a

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niche, much as railroad travel has in the jet age or radio in the television age. The key determinant, it seems to me, is economic. As paper and print production costs go up and up, more and more material will be published in electronic form for the very reason that it is so much less expensive to produce and market than print. Print will survive, but very much as an elite medium. Those who desire a print encyclopedia in, say, the year 2050 will surely be able to have one — if they're willing to pay the freight.

TG: Another development in encyclopedia publishing seems to be an ever increasing number of subject encyclopedias appearing on the market. What is accounting for this and what effect is it having?

KK: You're absolutely right, Tom. Subject encyclopedias, both one-volume and multivolume works, have been proliferating at a mind-boggling rate in recent times, especially since the end of World War II. It seems fairly obvious, at least to me, that this trend reflects what I call the irresistible human urge to specialize. The so-called "Renaissance man," who knew

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most everything about everything, is long gone. Today, information and knowledge are growing so rapidly due to specialization that a general encyclopedia, which attempts to cover all basic subjects, simply can't keep up. Its coverage becomes increasingly diffuse and superficial in light of all that is known. Enter the subject, or

specialized, encyclopedia, which allows the encyclopedist the luxury of concentrating on a particular discipline or topic.

TG: There are a number of well-known publishers competing in the subject encyclopedia market. Is this a particularly lucrative area of the reference publishing business?

KK: As you suggest, there are many prominent reference publishers — Macmillan, Scribner's, Wiley, Academic Press, McGraw-Hill, Gale, Oxford, Cambridge, Facts on File, Greenwood, Van Nostrand, and others — which are strongly committed to producing authoritative subject encyclopedias. These publishers find that such works normally do well in the marketplace. Why? First, because the appetite for solid specialized encyclopedias seems inexhaustible and, second, unlike general encyclopedias, they require no costly permanent editorial staff. On the negative side for consumers, prices of subject encyclopedias tend to be high, mainly because print runs are comparatively small. There is, however, the hope that, as more subject encyclopedias become available on CD-ROM, prices will come down to more affordable levels, as has happened with general encyclopedias. A case in point is McGraw-Hill's science encyclopedia [*McGraw-Hill Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*], which is now on CD-ROM in a multimedia edition that sells for \$500 or \$600 less than the print version.

TG: Your recently published Kister's Best Encyclopedias highlights a number of foreign-language encyclopedias. What are your impressions of this area of encyclopedia publishing? What trends have you noticed?

KK: Without question, foreign-language encyclopedias represent one of the most difficult areas of reference selection and acquisition

for librarians or other interested consumers in North America. The main difficulty is that there are no substantial review sources covering encyclopedias and other reference works in languages other than English. *LJ* [*Library Journal*], *RBB* [*Reference Books Bulletin*], *Choice*, *Wilson*

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terested consumers in North America. The main difficulty is that there are no substantial review sources covering encyclopedias and other reference works in languages other than English. *LJ* [Library Journal], *RBB* [Reference Books Bulletin], *Choice*, *Wilson* [Wilson Library Bulletin], *RQ*, *ARBA* [American Reference Books Annual] — none of these standard review publications cover foreign-language reference sources, including encyclopedias. The logical candidate to do this, it seems to me, is *Choice*. All I can suggest at this point concerning foreign-language encyclopedias is to heed the advice given by Emanuel Molho in my book [see *Kister's Best Encyclopedias*, p. 444]. An experienced specialist in the foreign book trade, Molho offers a realistic overview concerning the pitfalls of selecting and acquiring encyclopedias and related materials published in languages other than English. But what's really needed is a journal in English devoted exclusively to reviewing foreign-language reference publications, which seems like a reasonable proposition in these days of the global village and global economy.

TG: Your comments suggest that the library community has a mixed record on encyclopedia reviewing. Is that a fair summation of your views? And if so, what suggestions do you have for improvement?

*KK: I suppose it's inevitable that librarians would have a mixed record when it comes to reference and encyclopedia reviewing. It could hardly be any other way, could it, given the large number of reviews by librarians published in such journals as *LJ*, *Wilson*, *RQ*, *ARBA*, *RBB*, and *Choice*. In fact, practically all the reference reviews in these journals are by librarians. This is certainly true of *RBB* and *Choice*. Some reviews are naturally going to be better than others, depending on the skills*

and experience of particular reviewers.

TG: You've mentioned Reference Books Bulletin and Choice several times. How do these two well-known review journals measure up as far as encyclopedias are concerned?

*KK: Based on my experience — and I've reviewed for both at one time or another — both *RBB* and *Choice* normally provide quite useful reviews of reference materials, including encyclopedias. Of course, *Choice* usually only reviews subject encyclopedias, whereas *RBB* covers both general and subject works.*

Reviews are obviously very important. For example, recently a review skewered — quite unjustly — a new multivolume biographical encyclopedia published by a major reference publisher. The reviewer stated that most of the information in the biographical set could be found in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which is just plain wrong. My point is that such a statement should have been challenged by an alert editor.

TG: In the broadest sense, how can libraries and the library community best impact on reference publishing?

KK: Well, one important way, as we've been discussing, is through reviews by librarians — reviews that apply the standards developed by the library community. Such reviews carry enormous weight with reputable reference publishers. In fact, a negative review by a librarian can be the kiss of death for a new reference work. Librarians also influence reference publishing through their collection development policies. If a publisher knows or believes, for instance, that a certain subject is out of favor with librarians, this will impact on the decision to publish reference materials on that subject. One example: not long ago a publisher's rep told me that he thought his company's new military

encyclopedia was not doing well because, and I am quoting loosely here, "of a general negativism regarding the military among librarians — who tend to be a liberal and peace-minded group." I also think individual librarians can have a real impact on reference publishing by letting publishers know what's needed, what they don't appreciate, and so forth. Most publishers welcome such suggestions.

TG: Finally, Ken, what "words of wisdom" do you have for a harried Head of Reference and his or her staff, in selecting encyclopedias for today's library?

*KK: I would say, be skeptical. Or as Bill Katz once put it in his excellent *Introduction to Reference Work*, "Trust no one" when it comes to reference — not patrons, not your colleagues, not publishers, not reviewers, not even yourself. I think back, for instance, to a letter published some years ago in *RQ* from a young librarian decrying the lack of annual revision in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at the time. Trusting the *Britannica* name, she had automatically purchased a replacement set for her community college library and had been burned. She wrote to warn other librarians not to make the same mistake, to be wary. *Britannica* today has a much more vigorous policy of continuous revision, but the general point remains valid. When librarians acquire either a new encyclopedia or a new edition of a standard encyclopedia, they would be wise to immediately check 10 or 12 or 25 diverse topics, to see how well the set measures up in terms of up-to-dateness, readability, accessibility, illustrations, and so on. If the encyclopedia is found wanting, it should be returned posthaste. That's my advice — question everything and everyone, including the reviewers.*

TG: Even Kister?

Kister: Yes, especially Kister.

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county courts, real estate offices, state agencies and federal courts where public records are located. The directory is split into three sections: county, state and federal records. For ease of use, sections are color-coded

white, yellow and blue respectively and each section is preceded by helpful scope notes. This title is unique not only because it includes phone numbers, hours of operation, time zones and addresses of nearly

11,500 locations, but the type of public records to be found at each location as well. Advertised at the price of \$39.95, this ready reference tool is a bargain.