Notes from the Jurassic

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Choice

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It might be useful to ask at this point, Who is it that loves reference books? And by extension, Where is the market for them?

Certainly it’s not faculty. They think they know what is needed already, and many got their training in a system that values the literature, but believes retrieval sources are an annoyance. They have ways of keeping up in their field that bypass the reference network — conferences, colleagues, the print network, and private methods they are not always willing to acknowledge. They operate by keen observation, like whales scanning plankton, and depend more on serendipity than organized searching. One of the enduring legends attached to the Yale Library has to do with library plans to build a storage library. The stacks there were to be twelve feet high, aisles 28 inches wide, lighting dim, and temperature at a constant 50 degrees, and the collection was to consist exclusively of older titles that seldom circulated — not an inviting atmosphere. Given that environment, only library staff were to be allowed in the stacks; everyone else — even faculty — would have to submit call slips. When the political science faculty got wind of this, they waited on the librarian in a body and stamped around his office, declaring it impossible that they be denied access to the stacks, since their principle method of conducting research was to go to the library and look about on the shelves at random. Whether you believe that, or whether you believe the entire story, it perhaps illustrates that faculty have their own ways of getting at information and forming ideas, and that neither has much to do with the information network.

It’s not students, either. To them, bibliographies are long and hard to choose from; reference books interpose one more obstacle to getting their paper in on time. Reference books are difficult to use; in encyclopedias, you’ve got to use the index. Many students lack the patience to learn how to use individual reference books, let alone develop a picture of the retrieval mechanisms of a discipline. Many have difficulty using library catalogs. They lack the background of learning that would enable them to pose the kinds of questions reference books are set up to answer, and do not forget, they are taught by the faculty who specialize in dodging the organized network.

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encyclopedia of Associations, National Union Catalog in its various incarnations (pre-56, 1953-75 and later in print, 1983 and later, or microfiche) or OCLC and RLIN, which have effectively replaced NUC. If you are verifying a title or looking for a library location or trying to find data about an organization or looking for bibliographical information or trying to find definitions, synonyms, and etymology for a word, you want the biggest file you can find. Your chances of finding what you need are far better in a big file than a small one. And it is the sheer size of these files that allows them to be used in ways for which they were not designed. In our admittedly pathetic library at Choice, I was unable to find a verification for the spelling of "grey literature"; but OCLC, bless its heart, had a dozen entries. Before leaving this point, return with me to the question of definition, and note that Encyclopaedia of Associations is not an encyclopedia and Dictionary of American Biography is not a dictionary. Merriam-Webster tells me they hope to issue a fourth unabridged in the year 2000, but it will be in electronic form, a revelation that is heartening, since that particular site on the Web promises to be solid, authoritative, scholarly, and fully as organized and useful as its printed predecessors.

Second, good reference books treat broad general subjects. Examples that come to mind are Dicrionary of Cultural Abstracts, and Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan. These titles are useful not only because they cover their topic thoroughly, so there is assurance one will find something — usually a lot — concerning topics that are relevant, but that often a search will lead in directions that are not foreseen. By contrast, books that summarize the episodes of Chefs, bibliographies of Marge Piercy, discographies of Eddie Arnold or the Statler Brothers, or lists of British cinema sheet music not only are single-use sources but confirm suspicions one sometimes dully entertains about the trivialization of publishing.

Third, good reference books are firmly grounded in traditional scholarship. That is what lends many revered reference titles their continuing attraction — the assurance that the compilers are steeped in their subject down to their fingertips, have devoted a lifetime to its familiarization and study, and think nothing else half as important. Scholars want every avenue of their subject explored. That background of learning gives enduring appeal to MLA International Bibliography, to Magda Whitrow's Isis Cumulative Bibliography, and to not only the most recent editions of International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences or New Catholic Encyclopedia, but to their predecessors which continue to be used decades after publication. And of course not only the current edition of Britannica, but to earlier editions, especially the 9th and 11th, published in the first years of this century and now nearing a hundred years in age.

Fourth, good reference books provide a framework that defines the discipline. The serial bibliographies published by the professional learned societies do this — Sociological Abstracts, Psychological Abstracts, International Political Science Abstracts, Mathematical Reviews. All establish a classification that provides structure for the discipline, establishes boundaries, and enables scholars and students to see where a given contribution fits in the record a discipline regards as its own territory. It would be difficult to overstate the importance of this classifying function, which applies to subdisciplines as well, as Magda Whitrow showed for the history of science in Isis Cumulative Bibliography or Graham Walden for public opinion in his recent bibliography Public Opinion Polls and Survey Research.

Fifth, good reference books are subject-specific, not format-specific. ABC-Clio's respected World Bibliography Series covers only monographs. That is very well as far as goes, but only the most superficial students will be content with that. They want to know what's been done for them lately — the recent and ongoing research that is reported chiefly in the journal literature — and as complete a picture as possible of work done on their topic in whatever form it appears. Any of the serial bibliographies mentioned before will do that, as will MLA International Bibliography or PAIS, International in Print, the latter surveying monographs, journals, government publications — any format in which information was released. And, incidentally, in whatever language.

Sixth, good reference books are sensitive to the needs of libraries. Librarians are among the most diligent workers in the information vineyard, and their uses of bibliographies, abstract journals, and the range of reference sources needs to be respected and served, especially since they are the primary market for reference titles. Here are a few of the things reference publishers should watch for:

• Previous editions of a work, with dates of publication, should be listed somehow, preferably prominently on the title page, and always in the publisher's catalog. This tells libraries what constitutes a complete record, and will often tell them whether they need buy the most recent edition or can skip an edition.
• In bibliographies, giving library locations is a great help, especially to interlibrary loan units.
• Bibliographic citations should conform to the format and sequence of elements libraries can expect to encounter in their own catalogs. If the standard LC record shows entry for a record by title, that is how bibliographies in reference books should list it. Citations should follow standard library author-title-imprint-collation-series sequence.
• Always give full citations. The promising new source Periodical Contents Index from Chadwyck-Healey (available in CD-ROM and Internet versions) was compiled from the tables of contents of journals, so gives only the initial page for each article citation. If you want to see how short interlibrary loans fuses can be, take them a journal cite that does not have inclusive pagination.

Well, enough. Let me close with a few suggestions I like to think publishers of reference books may want to consider in issuing future titles and that will endear them forever to librarians.

In reference books, the introductory remarks that precede each section are crucial to the proper setting of the stage for what follows. Displaying the information is not enough. Students need advice on thinking about the meaning of the information that will follow, and about the project that brought them to the reference book in the first place. They need more than data or citations; they need text that provides context for their use of the source.

In sources like subject encyclopedias where the text composed for the occasion is the bearer of the information, the writing needs to be concise where that is needed and full where that is needed, but always clear. Publishers might make a special present of Strunk and White to anyone who signs a contract to compile a reference source. In this context, you might examine M.H. Abrams's indispensable A Glossary of Literary Terms.

Despite that I've said about Big Files, the sheer volume of some subjects is overwhelming. Few too much has been written about Shakespeare, for example, to fit comfortably within one book or one mind. Selection is needed, as in Larry Clumpion's The Essential Shakespeare.

There should be truth in advertising. When a bibliography lists only monographs, its subtitle should say so.

No one ever reads the front matter in a reference book — not even reference librarians when they can avoid it, as I said earlier. The design of the book has to compensate: the title needs to be descriptive, and the organization clear and driven by the content, so the book's layout and possibilities are evident on examination.

Reference publishers would do well to reissue sets published over time as discrete volumes (for example, Scarrow's Historical Dictionaries of Africa series) in a single set, under one editorship, with articles updated, comprehensive bibliographies appended, indexes and cross-references for the set, notes where necessary — the whole nine yards of scholarly apparatus.

I need not tell reference publishers that none of this comes cheap. But I like to believe that publishers can find ways to fund large scholarly reference projects at the same time they are taking the quicker income (paltry though that often may be) that comes from smaller titles. I fear the day is past when publishers could rely on scholars or librarians who had other sources of income and could devote years of their lives to the compilation of reference titles.

Let me stop here, assuring all of you that librarians wish you well and look forward to great reference titles we will see from each of you in the coming years.