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Notes from the Jurassic

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A version of this talk was delivered to the Independent Reference Publishers Group, San Francisco, June 27, 1997. — KS

It is a pleasure to see so many publishers of reference books in one place. I'd like to offer a few observations concerning reference publishing at the risk of telling you what you already know. Since you are in the business of acquiring, editing, and sending reference books into the world, there is little a mere editor can say that you have not long since realized.

Before beginning to belabor the obvious, a word about myself. If what I write has a faint whiff of the Jurassic, it is because I am a dinosaur. I was raised on print and have not yet adjusted to the era of the Internet and the World Wide Web. With printed sources, one can examine a new work to see what it looks like: see how it is organized, whether there are indexes or bibliographies, how it lays out on the page, whether there is a table of contents or list of contributors, can leaf back and forth to see whether personal favorites (people or topics) are included. That is how seasoned librarians become familiar with a new title — acquire the feeling for its heft that causes them to remember it when that is necessary. Finally, when all the tricks for postponing it are exhausted, they look around in the introductory matter to see what the compilers say they are up to: what limits they put on the topic, what dates are covered, what earlier titles the one in hand relates to. You always know where you are and have a sense of the entirety of the source.

With sources on the Internet or the Web, that sense of boundaries is lacking. Pointers lead off in many directions, making trees of pursuit. There is ample sense of excitement, but the associations that are offered are often trivial and lead in directions that are not meaningful. One can seldom be sure that one has followed all the possible avenues, or even what the avenues are. I once opened a site in classical archaeology, and following a straightforward tree of associations, ended up at a page whose purpose was to sell roadkill placards for the bumper of your automobile. One can seldom be sure whether all the possible pointers have been explored or that they are worth exploring. Lacking in most sites is the sense that someone is in control, that a scholar has spent time in contemplation, synthesizing and interpreting information.

Consequently, what I have to say will be based on knowledge of printed sources that I have acquired in more years of reference and editorial work than I care to admit. The electronic sources I may happen to mention are those that have stood the test of time and been found useful in the library environment.

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 needful 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 offprint network — and private methods they are not always willing to acknowledge. They operate by oceanic immersion, like whales straining 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

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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.

The people by whom reference books are beloved and to whom they appeal are librarians. It is librarians who believe that the spring list from Garland or Greenwood or Scarecrow is going to help them in working with readers,

and who must overcome reluctance on the part of book selectors (often themselves faculty or only a step away from faculty appointments). Librarians imagine that if they can communicate the structure of information in a discipline, by which they mean its reference network, to students and faculty, the understanding and appreciation by both of the deeper meaning of information-seeking will somehow be conveyed. They are probably wrong. But this does help explain why reference publishers sell only to libraries, and can put paid to the sales of any reference title if they reach 2,000 (never mind those that sell far fewer copies).

One might think that if librarians adore reference books they would be able to tell you what a reference book is, but if you ask a roomful of them to give you a definition, you would find them riding off in several directions with no agreement in sight. Sure, they could give you some examples: dictionaries, bibliographies, encyclopedias, directories. Or they could fall back on one of the standard definitions — they're the books in the reference rooms that don't circulate, or those used for consultation but not read through, or books made up of organized files. But none would be able to frame a definition of the essence of reference books that the rest would agree on. Many reference librarians insist that standard treatises and histories are often used to answer reference queries, so

although they don't look like reference books, they need to be in the reference collection. It is rather like the definition of pornography used by the Supreme Court justices — I can't tell you what it is, but I know it when I see it — a formula that implies that the justices have ample familiarity with that kind of writing. Publishers are no help either, since they frequently assign titles that betray ignorance of the way reference books are organized or used. Even the Library of Congress sometimes gives up, using "dictionaries and encyclopedias" as a subheading, thus avoiding one of the more ticklish distinctions. The difficulty for librarians lies in defining something that is in a continuous state of development, a situation not materially aided by the explosion of the Internet. Most reference librarians have to finally admit: it's a reference book if I say it's a reference book.

So having confessed that none of us knows what we are talking about, what is it that makes a good reference book, one that librarians will use faithfully and with confidence or even affection for years or decades? Let me hint at several characteristics, warning that these are my own criteria, based on my experience, and that another person's list might differ from this one.

First, great reference books are made up of big files. Some examples might be Merriam Webster's *Third International Dictionary*, En-

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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 on 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 biographical 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 *Encyclopedia 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 *Dictionary of Art, Chemical 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 *Cheers*, 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 darkly entertains about the trivialization of reference 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 to 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 all 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 it 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 appeared. 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 somewhere, preferably on the title page verso, 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 the 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. Far too much has been written about Shakespeare, for example, to fit comfortably within one book or one mind. Selection is needed, as in Larry Champion'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, Scarecrow'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.