

‘The index of heightened sensations’: collaboration between a skilled indexer and a creative writer to produce a special-purpose index

Lynn Jenner and Tordis Flath

Lynn Jenner’s PhD thesis in creative writing, *Everyday life in the ancient world, is a four-part mixed-genre work about human responses to loss*. ‘The index of heightened sensations’ is Part Four. In three hectic weeks over the summer of 2012–13 Lynn, a creative writer with an interest in genre-crossing poetry, and Tordis, an indexer with an interest in creative writing, collaborated to construct this index. In this article they outline their individual perspectives about the processes of collaboration and the outcomes to date.

Aims of the creative work

Lynn:

This whole thesis project is relatively unconventional. My intention was to create four text objects, of which the index was one, designed to resonate with each other as objects in an art exhibition do, each object capable of standing alone, but forming a larger picture when placed side by side. I hoped that this structure would give me the opportunity to use form differently in each part. I aimed to place different topics in the foreground in each piece, but join the four parts and their various sections of content through their relationship to themes of loss, search and reconstruction.

Specific aims for the index

Lynn:

The index was intended to act as a link between the other three parts by placing their diverse subjects side by side, shaken up into alphabetical order as index entries. In my mind, before we began, I was enjoying the idea of an index as a sort of long poem. My supervisors were thinking ‘poem’ too, and also that the index would be a good piece of critical apparatus for the thesis.

From the beginning I wanted the index to display the preoccupations of the other texts; remix these alphabetically and remind readers of relevant dates, books, authors and places. It was to be the ultimate poetic list in a text that included several other poetic lists. It would be the *whakapapa* (genealogy) of the work too, reciting the names of books and writers and events which have gone before, making possible and eventually causing the birth of this work.

At the beginning of the exercise I struggled to explain to Tordis what I was trying to achieve with the index, because I did not fully understand what exactly I wanted the end product to look like. This level of open-endedness is normal in creative writing. To get us started I came up with this operational description:

- 1 The index should fulfil a reader’s expectations for help with finding material.
- 2 The index should intersperse these entries with the names of objects and phenomena chosen for the beauty of the words.
- 3 The index should sometimes surprise a reader with entries which are a little quixotic.

Some constraints

Lynn:

I had no prior experience of making an index and came to the task with only a reader’s experience of indexes to guide me about what was possible.

The fact that this index was to be part of a PhD brought with it the requirement that the finished work needed to be mine.

In the back of my mind, as we worked, I had three questions:

- What percentage of functional elements and what percentage of creative elements would work best?
- Would the functional elements and the more clearly ‘creative’ elements undermine each other or complement each other?
- How far can the core notion of an index be pushed while still retaining its usual functions?

Tordis:

At the beginning, I wondered what the headings in an index of a creative work would be. No doubt there would be people and places to index, but what other themes would arise and what concepts would Lynn want to index? I also wondered how we would be able to make the work Lynn’s without her having to learn how to index and to use the software. The whole project was quite a challenge and I looked forward to it.

Iterations

Lynn:

During the process I realized that I wanted the index to have the same emotional range as the other three texts. This became a fourth goal. I was not surprised to find that ideas about the index developed while writing it, because all my writing is iterative. I have an idea. I try it out. I look to see what works and what doesn't. I then pull the work further in the direction of the aspects that are working and drop aspects that are not working. I do this many times to make any piece of writing. The index worked in exactly this way, as we wrote it together, and it is continuing to evolve, although now only in my hands.

Tordis:

Once Lynn started to understand how an index works, her entries changed. Each time we saw each day's version, it helped to form our overall picture of the index and what parts needed to be emphasized more or less in terms of the three goals.

Objectivity/authority

Lynn:

The fact that ultimately the author of the text has selected the entries for this index takes away the 'objectivity' that professional indexers aim to bring to the task, and puts in its place another opportunity for the egotistical author to emphasise some things and reduce emphasis on or remove other things for artistic or philosophical reasons. I took advantage of this.

For example, in the excerpt below, I have indexed fictional characters Ari Ben Canaan and a Mr Bloomfield as if they were people because I make a point in the work about what can be learned from fiction.¹

Ben Canaan, Ari (soldier/farmer) 187
 Beran, Karel (Holocaust survivor)
 ashes put to peace 257
 in a boxcar 196
 brought urn of ashes to NZ 210, 247–248, 255–257
 message for the future 258
 oral history interview 253–258
 return to Auschwitz 247–248, 253–257
 Bloomfield from Carlton (Holocaust survivor) 222, 234, 237
 see *also* dybbuks

I used the descriptor 'Holocaust survivor' in the index to emphasize this aspect of certain people's lives. I have not indexed individual Nazis mentioned in the text, and have not focused much on Nazi activities such as concentration camps, although these situations are the background to much of the text, because I was clear that I wanted this work to privilege the 'survivor' experience. Headings such as 'Holocaust' have the potential to overshadow all other subjects. With this in mind, I have kept the heading 'Holocaust' very brief in the index, although it occupies probably

half of the 300 pages of the thesis. I kept the heading small because I wanted to avoid any suggestion that I have written an overview of the whole subject.

At one stage my supervisor suggested I index the concept of loss. As an obedient PhD student I attempted this, but failed. Loss in one form or another pervaded the whole work, something which, after this experiment, seemed best left implicit. I have commented directly on this in the index.

longing 47

loss (un-indexable)

The Lost: a Search for Six of the Six Million (book) (Mendelsohn)
 195

loyalty 98

Tordis:

Lynn created what I would term 'unusual' headings in the index for things she wanted to emphasize in the text. For example, she created a heading called 'activities'. Initially some of these were activities of the author and others activities of other people in the text. Later she moved away from putting them all under 'activities', and we changed the heading to 'activities of the author' and put the other ones under main headings like 'thrifting', 'back-shadowing', 'carrying home the body of someone important', 'categorizing silences', and 'deliberate ignoring'.

It was quite different from indexing most non-fiction books. I was able to draw on my experience of indexing *I have what I gave: The fiction of Janet Frame*, which dedicated a chapter to each of her books. I had indexed the fictional characters in this book as some of them featured in several of her books and seemed relevant to students of her work.

Some of my comments about this also featured in an article on indexing fictional characters in non-fiction works in *The Indexer* by Madeleine Davis. I have recently been asked to quote to index a book of prose, which will no doubt be very interesting. I gave Lynn this article and the Janet Frame book to read before we started.

The collaboration process

Lynn:

I found Tordis by asking a publisher for names of indexers they had used. I received a list of three names, and the comment that Tordis was the best of the three. At the start I approached Tordis with a request that she mentor me as I wrote the index. At our first meeting she told me about some indexes she had made and the mentoring programme. She seemed comfortable to be working with a novice on a rather strange project. This seemed to bode well. She lent me Nancy Mulvany's *Indexing books*, to begin my orientation.

After reading *Indexing books*, I decided that the logic of indexes was possibly beyond me, no matter how long I had to learn it. There was also the issue of how long it might take if I tried to learn to use indexing software.

After discussion with Tordis, we planned that Tordis would bring all her knowledge and sophistication about indexing and her expertise with the software, and I would

bring my understanding of the intent of the thesis as a whole and hopes for the finished product, and together we would make something that would meet all the (possibly incompatible) goals. Our plan at this stage was that she would teach me how to mark up my text, I would then do the marking up and she would enter the selected entries into the software. That did not work. Tordis will explain why.

We finally settled on a process which had each of us working by ourselves, marking up the text in batches. We would then review the batch of text together and I would decide what entries to use. When I say 'together' here, I mean literally. We sat side by side and discussed every entry, Tordis acting as a consultant about indexing, pointing out what convention would suggest and physically constructing the index while I considered the individual entries in the light of the big picture and took final responsibility for the selection of entries and therefore for the tone of the index. In the evening, after each day of work, I would review the index so far and bring modifications to our next session of working together, and Tordis did the same. The combined effect of this process was that we moved through the work in spirals, going forward separately then together, to include new text in each session and also returning together to review each session's work.

Tordis:

Because of the requirements of her PhD that Lynn 'creates' all the work, this index was very different from my usual projects in that I was acting in a consultative/teaching role to Lynn. I explained how to index the text and indexing rules, we used my copy of SKY Index to compile the actual index, and I guided Lynn through every step of the way but I did not actually select the entry terms or compile the index as such.

Initially we thought that our process would be:

- 1 Lynn will finish each of the three chapters and then mark up her headings.
- 2 We will have a meeting to do 10–20 pages together.
- 3 Tordis will then enter all the headings into SKY Index and make a note of any additions/suggestions.
- 4 We meet again to discuss what's been entered and what's been omitted.
- 5 We complete each chapter.
- 6 We edit/review the index as a whole and make style changes together.

We started out the first day with Lynn bringing along some marked-up pages of the first chapter and she sat beside me at the computer screen as we began to enter them into the index file. We discussed the entries and I typed them in. As we went along I explained how the index might work and what I usually did. We initially just entered any entries she had marked up, working our way through the marked-up pages.

Once we had completed all the pages Lynn had marked up for that session, I printed out a draft of the index to date. This gave Lynn an overview of how the index would look. She then took that away to study and mark up the

next batch. Meanwhile I had a thorough read of the text we had worked through and noted any additional entries or consistency issues.

My read-through of her complete text gave me an overview of what she was doing and how the index was shaping up. When she came back for the next session, we first discussed my suggested additions and changes, and then her changes, each time making the 'decided on' changes to the index.

We initially thought that once Lynn had got the hang of marking up the entries, I could just enter in a large pile of pages for each chapter, but the collaborative process worked so well that we never got to this point.

The work was very intense, especially for Lynn, and after about 20–30 pages we would schedule the next session. We had several days where we did a couple of sessions in one day, with longer breaks for lunch, and Lynn going away to mark up more pages and my reading through the work, and then coming together again to revise and carry on. After each session, I would print out the latest version of the index for Lynn to peruse.

'The index of heightened sensations'

Lynn:

In March 2013, after we had made the index, I came across a description by the writer W. G. Sebald of his use of symbols in his writing. He called these words-as-symbols 'moments of heightened sensation'. That seemed to me to be a very good summary of the governing principle behind the selection of entries for the index Tordis and I had made. What is 'in' is what makes your heart beat a little faster, or maybe what makes you sit still for a moment to notice or enjoy a feeling.

Tordis:

Lynn also created entries for interesting or beautiful phrases like 'fog of awareness', 'sweetness, almost all gone', 'apple blossom petals', 'warm scented winds', 'anxiety of influence'. Whenever pieces of the text like this drew a response from me, I would point them out to Lynn for possible inclusion. In this way, it was quite a creative process for both of us as well.

Where to now?

Lynn:

In March 2013, for the presentation we gave at the ANZSI conference, I wrote:

Since the thesis version of the index has been written, I have found myself using the index to find things in the text, so I know that, for me anyway, it works for this purpose. As far as whether it achieves its artistic aims, I am not sure. I am not concerned about this lack of certainty, since it is a common feature of my writing that I am slow to come to a steady view of its successes or otherwise. In this case, because this is a PhD, I will be helped by receiving some feedback on the whole work,

including the index, from three examiners. Based on that I will finalize the PhD version of the project.

July 2013 update: Interestingly none of my PhD examiners commented on the index at all. Since completing the PhD I have begun discussion with a publisher about adapting the whole thesis for trade publication. As part of this discussion I have received some feedback that while the index in its thesis form is successful as an index, it is not reaching its goal of making a significant artistic contribution to the work as a whole. I had already been reconsidering the index myself, and had been experimenting with making more authorial intrusions into it, to make it more 'readable' as a text.

As part of preparing this article, I have been reading past issues of *The Indexer*, and particularly enjoyed reading Hazel Bell's recent article 'Biographies as soft, narrative texts' (2012). I found the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' texts fascinating. In these terms my text would be at the farthest edge of 'soft'. I was intrigued by Richard Abel's distinction, quoted by Bell, between information (dry) and knowledge (soft). I intend to play up this distinction in my upcoming revision of the index as part of the trade publication, perhaps by inserting pieces of commentary into the index, so that the original entries fall into the category of 'information' and the commentaries are more like distilled 'knowledge' that the research and the writing have given to the author. At present I am experimenting with the idea of marking out the distinction in typeface and size.

Reflections on the collaboration process

Lynn:

I found our collaboration process required enormous concentration at the level of individual entries, and also that I needed to step back often to reflect on how the whole was looking. It was demanding, and had an odd interiority, a little like I imagine brain surgery might feel. Not pain exactly, but penetration and probing. After we had nearly finished the index I realized that what we had done had allowed me to write a new creative work, under time pressure and in an interdisciplinary way. No wonder it was an intense process.

I think that the index we made in January 2013 fulfilled the three original aims I had for it. I also think that its functional elements were in a trial of strength with its creative elements, and that my decision to favour the functional elements was appropriate for a thesis. As the thesis is now being transformed into a book, the index we made in January 2013 has revealed itself to me as one step, and a totally necessary one, in a development process. I have needed all the space and time since we made the index to be able to consider possible ways to develop it further, and I would not be in this position if we had not done the project.

Tordis:

I found this project very interesting, and greatly enjoyed working with Lynn.

Note

- 1 For the record, Karel Beran was a real person from Czechoslovakia whose story I tell some of in the text. Ari Ben Canaan, from the mandate of Palestine, and Bloomfield, from the Melbourne suburb of Carlton, were men I met in books.

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Lynn Jenner studied for her PhD in creative writing at the International Institute of Modern Letters at Victoria University of Wellington. Lynn's first book, Dear sweet Harry, published by Auckland University Press, won the New Zealand Society of Authors Best First Book of Poetry prize in 2010.
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Tordis Flath trained as an indexer in 1988 in England, working for Indexing Specialists. She then worked in-house for The Listener, which she indexed along with several TV magazines for four years. In 1997 she began freelancing in back-of-the-book and journal indexes. She helped in founding the New Zealand branch of ANZSI in 2004, was president from 2004–06, a committee member in 2008 and vice-president since 2009. In 2004 she won the ANZSI Medal for her index to the biography of painter Toss Woollaston. She has been a mentor for the NZ Branch Mentoring Scheme since 2005 and organizes and runs training courses. She also organized the 2013 ANZSI Conference in Wellington.
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Up to my oxters

I've been up to my oxters in garden-related books for the past couple of weeks in order to bring you my pick of the crop for 2013. First though, I have a plea. I have noticed that an increasing number of books now contain no index. Negotiating a book without an index is like navigating without a compass, GPS or other aid. It takes away the fun and adds a heap of frustration. My plea to publishers is this: don't lose the index for the sake of a few quid. If non-fiction books are to compete with the internet, they must hold on tight to their indexes.

From *One Bean Row, Words and pictures from an Irish garden* by Jane Powers
<http://onebeanrow.com/?s=index>

with thanks to Eileen O'Neill (SI) for drawing it to our attention