

## Indexes: comedic, humorous and laughable (for all the right reasons)

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### The set-up

An index can provide an entertaining conclusion to a book in its own right. Some indexes can be unfortunately laughable for entirely the wrong reasons, but many authors and indexers choose to add deliberate humour to this final part of the book, and some do this very well. Over the last couple of years, I have been writing a series of blog posts on the comedy book index on my website ([baindex.org](http://baindex.org)), some of which have become articles for *The Indexer* journal (Bain 2017, 2018), continuing the fine tradition of Hazel Bell's reviews of comedic indexes (see Bell 2001a, 2001b). I'm pleased to present an overview of some recent examples for this issue of *Catalogue and Index*.

I have always had a great interest in comedy in my leisure time, and I have indexed a lot of books in my work hours, having been a full-time freelancer since 2001. It's been a great delight to me, as both a comedy and indexing fan, to see that many of my favourite comedy writers have recently produced books that have plenty of humorous material in their indexes. These include Francis Wheen, Charlie Brooker, Richard Ayoade, and the writers of the Alan Partridge and Steven Toast characters, all of which I review below.

### Strange indexes indeed: Francis Wheen

The earliest of these were two books by Francis Wheen, journalist and deputy editor of *Private Eye* magazine. *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World* was published in 2004 and *Strange Days Indeed* followed in 2009. The books provide commentary on the political and social changes, and associated delusions and paranoia, of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Both books were indexed by Francis Wheen himself, who proves to be a fine author-indexer. The humour in these indexes largely comes from the subheadings used to qualify people in the index. Often these are politicians, from the 1970s in *Strange Days*:

Heath, Edward: as Empress of Blandings, 38  
Nixon, President Richard M.: ... bugs himself, 34–5, 37–9  
Wilson, Harold: ... as big fat spider, 9, 269, 270

And from more recent times in *Mumbo-Jumbo*:

Blair, Tony: ... claims descent from Abraham, 165  
Clinton, Bill: empathy junkie, 194  
Thatcher, Margaret: ... enjoys 'electric baths', 129

This index includes a few interesting subheadings for royalty:

Elizabeth II, Queen: accused of cocaine-smuggling, 149  
Philip, Prince: enjoys *Flying Saucer Review*, 136; praised by extra-terrestrials, 137–8

It also has some nicely balanced wording to show the comeuppance of certain figures:

Aitken, Jonathan: admires risk-takers, 59; goes to jail, 60  
Ronson, Gerald: eulogised by Jonathan Aitken and Jeffrey Robinson, 59; goes to jail, 60

There is also an extensive entry for 'God' in the *Mumbo-Jumbo* index in the UK edition, including subentries for various things that people had claimed as God's work, for example '*arrives in America; helps vacuum-cleaner saleswoman; produces first self-help manual*'. Interestingly, this index was scrapped and redone for the US market. Francis Wheen told me via Twitter that his US publisher advised him, '*Over here, we don't like jokes in indexes.*' What a shame. In my view, the indexes just enhance the humour of the books.

### **Charlie Brooker's *Burn, Dumb, Hell and Hate***

The same could be said about the indexes of writer and presenter Charlie Brooker, namely the ones for *Screen Burn* (2005), *Dawn of the Dumb* (2007), *The Hell of It All* (2009) and *I Can Make You Hate* (2013). These books are collections of his *Guardian* newspaper columns. He confirmed for me on Twitter that his publisher Faber & Faber supplied him with the indexes in basic form, which he then 'joke-i-fied'. In the *Burn* and *Dumb* indexes, most of the humour comes from amusing subentry wording relating to politicians and TV stars. Several are also rather swearsy but here are a few tamer examples from *Burn*:

Barker, Linda: inferior to mop, 252  
Brown, Gordon: lesser twerp than Blair, 285  
Davidson, Jim: provokes tooth-grinding, 7

And from *Dumb*:

Cameron, David, justifiable abuse of, 275–6  
Edmonds, Noel, exploring dual realities, 139–40  
Hewer, Nick, face like an eagle peering at a banknote, 155

By the time of the *Hell* and *Hate* indexes, Brooker is having even more fun with the 'joke-i-fying'. In the *Hate* index, Brooker deliberately misnames many of the figures referred to (correctly) in the text:

Blair, Tiny, 100, 133  
Chiles, Atrium, 257  
Clegg, Knock, 99, 100, 101  
Van Outen, The Niece, 51

There is also a nice sequence of circular cross-references in *Hate*:

ceaseless repetition, see déjà vu  
déjà vu, see make it stop  
endless loop, see unbreakable cycle  
I can't, I just can't, see endless loop  
make it stop, see I can't, I just can't  
unbreakable cycle, see ceaseless repetition

Both the *Hell* and *Hate* indexes display a playful sense of toying with the index reader. From *Hell*, we have:

letters of the alphabet, variously configured, 1–388  
lying, 18–19, 131–3, 225–6, 299, 346–8 (one of these is a lie)  
numbered pages, 1–388  
random page numbers, 8, 44–9, 70, 84, 213–28, 337

In *Hate*, there are many more:

- arbitrary choice of page, 14
- scanning the page for a reference that isn't there, 67
- section of air behind book, 410–495
- time: regrets about wasting, like you're doing now, 29

Some very odd things are going on elsewhere in this index:

Someone is behind you; not physically, but in spirit; call it a presence if that helps. This isn't an index entry; it's a warning: someone is standing directly behind you *right now*

And, spookily, near the end:

you are imagining these words in the index

### **Back of the book/net: Alan Partridge (aha)**

All the books discussed so far are non-fictional works about real-life events and people. Some other recent comedy books are fictional works presented in the form of memoirs. As they are structured as autobiographical texts, they also include indexes like standard works of non-fiction.

Two excellent examples are the Alan Partridge parody memoirs *I, Partridge: We Need to Talk About Alan* (2011) and *Alan Partridge: Nomad* (2016). Alan Partridge is an established comedy character, played by Steve Coogan since the early 1990s. The books are written by Neil Gibbons, Rob Gibbons and Steve Coogan (plus Armando Iannucci for *I, Partridge*). *I, Partridge* is presented as the autobiography of Alan Partridge, with *Nomad* as its 'beautifully punctuated follow-up', describing Partridge's mission to walk a 160-mile journey from the fine city of Norwich. As with a standard (auto)biography index, the largest entry in *I, Partridge* is for the main subject himself, with richly detailed subheadings and sub-subheadings:

- Partridge, Alan Gordon
  - dress and grooming
    - aftershave (Pagan Man) 122
    - dressing gown, when alone 132
  - food and drink
    - Interfered-with sandwiches 24
    - Toblerone addiction 203–4, 213–23, 228–9, 231
  - homes and dwellings
    - static caravan 254–5
    - 'unstatic' caravan 260

In *Nomad*, the main entry for Partridge is considerably less detailed, and not placed where you might expect to find it:

- I (Alan Partridge) 1–285
- Partridge, Alan – see I

The entries for Partridge's parents in *I, Partridge* offer intriguing insight:

- Partridge, Dorothy (mother)
  - compared to Rover 800 177
  - neither nice nor important 141
- Partridge, Snr (father)
  - butterfly tennis 7
  - death 244, 247
  - Location post-death 249

As does the one for his ex-wife:

- Partridge, Carol *née* Parry (ex-wife)
  - body shape, attempted 260
  - dog-like hair 37
  - Jealous of Sue Cook 71

The *Nomad* index is much shorter than the first one but still offers several nuggets:

- Cherubs
  - physical strength 231
  - aeronautic capability 232
- Countryfile*, that woman who sued 10
- Haddaway, a man that looked like 257
- Jam bombs 149
- Jambon 149
- Last Post, the
  - whistled while miming a bugle 36
  - actually bugled, albeit badly 213
- Phalanx, nice use of the word 73

Neil Gibbons told me via Twitter that for the *Nomad* index, 'someone *at the publishers did a basic one and we mucked about with it*'. I was also pleased to be contacted by Mark Bolland at HarperCollins, who confirmed that he was the original indexer for *I, Partridge*. He kindly allowed me a look at his original, unexpurgated index file, which was considerably longer and even more Partridgean, but unfortunately much of this was cut before publication. What remains is still great fun though.

### Time for Toast

Similar humour can be seen in the index to the spoof 'part memoir, part "how to act" manual' *Toast on Toast* (2015), based on the life of 'Steven Toast', renowned thespian played by Matt Berry in the TV series *Toast of London*. The book was written by Matt Berry and Arthur Mathews, and Arthur Mathews confirmed for me that he wrote its index. Again, the subheadings for the main character give a measure of Toast's self-regard:

Toast, Steven: early signs of talent, 16; healthy sex drive, 67, 89, 99, 200; hugely successful voiceover career, 89, 90; receives ecstatic reviews, 78, 99, 100–06; success with women, 80, 90, 110, 111 ...

Toast's main acting rival, Ray Purchase, is afforded a detailed entry in the index:

Purchase, Ray: lack of talent, 56, 67, 89–98; incompetence as actor, 67, 88, 99, 122, 134; ... peculiar appearance, 88, 90; ... senseless cruelty towards animals, 67; kills Michael Ball, 91

As is his wife:

Purchase, Mrs, 56, 78; failed and loveless marriage to Ray, 89, 90–9; Toast has sex with, 67, 68, 70–2; ... admiration of and loyalty to Toast, 88; takes part in drone strikes for US government, 81; appearance on *Strictly Come Dancing*, 188

There are some gloriously named fellow (fictional) thespians:

Aaaaaadams, Aaaaaalan, 98  
Fandango, Clem, 78–89  
Frumpty, Mews, 67, 68, 80, 82, 84, 86  
Fufoon, Besus, 89  
Residue, Shorley, 78, 89, 99, 100  
Spraymount, Billy, 1  
Strepsils, Henty, 88

Certain things are in the index for comedic value alone and do not relate to the text at all:

4, Channel, 4  
101, Dalmations, 101; Toast counts individually, 102  
Ali, Muhammad, 7; floats like a butterfly, 88; stings like a bee, 603

It's all rather weird and wonderful.

### **Ayoade on Ayoade**

Speaking of index oddities, there is also much to be enjoyed in the book indexes of Richard Ayoade, comedy actor/writer and film director. His two books *Ayoade on Ayoade: A Cinematic Odyssey* (2014) and *The Grip of Film* (2017) are, as the titles indicate, based in the world of cinema. I have not yet found out who indexed these but I suspect it may be similar to the Charlie Brooker situation, with a basic index 'joke-i-fied' by the author. *Ayoade on Ayoade* is a parody of Faber & Faber's *Directors on Directors* series, with one 'Ayoade' persona as interviewer questioning another 'Ayoade' as film director. The alternative persona he adopts in *The Grip of Film* is someone else entirely: a foul-mouthed director named Gordy LaSure. The index to *The Grip of Film* is lengthy, often hilarious, and even comes with an introductory note denoting various typographical cues for different kinds of entries. Much of the content of this index however is extremely swearsy, reflecting the '*relentlessness of Gordy's profanity*', so I'll say no more about it here, but a few choice examples are included on my blog.

The *Ayoade on Ayoade* index is much briefer but equally peculiar. Given that this is supposed to be a film director's musings, a reader might expect an index full of directors and films. There are a few but not the ones you might predict (examples include such classics as *Herbie Goes Bananas*, *Scary Movie* and *Speed 2: Cruise Control*). What does appear are various food stuffs:

grapes, squelchy, 260  
guavas, bombardment of, 267  
nectarines, pelting with, 267  
puddings (custard-y one and a lighter one), 190  
Shakey Jake (milkshake), 3

And most of all just many, many strange things:

- alarms, egg-shaped panic, 122
- dew, mature stag glistening with, 255
- guff, inexhaustible tub of, 126
- mechanically closing door, power-slide under a, 249
- pescetarian, bitter feud with a, 254
- sheep, ten billion gently gavotting, 249

All of these are indeed mentioned on the pages given, but they are not what any reader would think to look up, nor what these pages are actually *about*, but then that's not really the point.

### **Back (of the book) to the future**

A forthcoming blog post will be on *Their Brilliant Careers* by Ryan O'Neill (2018). This is a wonderfully funny book which includes several additional gems in the index. The book purports to be a collection of profiles of 'sixteen extraordinary Australian writers' but the whole thing is a spoof, including the exaggerated author persona of 'Ryan O'Neill' here assumed by the real O'Neill. The reader is told halfway through the book that its index was written by Rachel Deverall, the estranged and now deceased wife of 'Ryan O'Neill'. Deverall is also one of the writers profiled in the book, herself being a made-up figure. The index reveals Deverall's attitude on her husband and his book:

- barefaced lies, 121–37
- delusions of grandeur, 259
- egomaniac, *see* O'Neill, Ryan
- hackwork, 28, 37–9, 66, 95–9
- mistakes, 1–259
- mistress, *see* Zoellner, Anne
- pyromaniac, *see* O'Neill, Ryan

There are other much worse (and funnier) cross-references to O'Neill in the index.

As regards my own indexing work, I try to include a few entertaining entries when the tone of the book warrants it. This summer, I was lucky enough to index *Soupy Twists! The Full, Official Story of the Sophisticated Silliness of Stephen Fry and Hugh Laurie* by Jem Roberts (2018). Jem and I thought we'd have fun with a few of the index headings, reflecting the daftness of the comedy source material. Time will tell how many of these entries made the publisher's final cut, but if enough of them make it to print (publication due early September), I will blog about this one too.

### **The punchline**

In this whistle-stop overview, I hope I have given some flavour of the kinds of humorous indexes that are currently being published by some of my favourite comedy writers. There is much more in each worth exploring. All of the indexes still work as perfectly usable information retrieval devices, aside from things included purely for comedic value, and in my eyes they provide considerable added entertainment value at the backs of their respective books. I'm always on the lookout for new examples so I would be keen to hear of any further suggestions. May there be many more laughable indexes.

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