



Thoughts from Linda:

All the Knowledge in the World:
*The Extraordinary History
of the Encyclopedia*

Simon Garfield
2022

Simon Garfield wrote this terrific book for book lovers of all types, people who love learning, and those of us who had to find out about things before the advent of the internet and our good friend and colleague, Siri. And, by the way, Siri just reminded me that the internet emerged in the United States in the 70s but did not become visible to the general public until the early 1990s. Today it is estimated that 4.5 billion people, or more than half of the world's population, have access to it.

It wasn't always this way. I can well remember writing papers for classes in high school or college and needing to find resources in the library, with a major focus on the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, among others. Growing up, our parents saved money to purchase the *World Book Encyclopedia*, an amazing and more economical alternative at the time. It took up most of the shelving in our small living area in Paris, Texas.

So, where did this idea come from? How did these remarkable repositories of all the known knowledge in the world emerge? Who wrote or compiled them? And what is their place in the history books today?

Answers to these questions and many more lie in the pages of this 2022 book, which is a favorite of the New York Times staff. Published in 2022, it is authored by Simon Garfield, the NYT bestselling author of more than a dozen unique books of non-fiction, including *To the Letter* (which is about the lost art of letter writing,) *Just My Type* (all about type fonts) and *On the Map* (about the history of maps and much more.). He was born in London and educated at the University College School in Hampstead and the London School of Economics. He is a journalist who wrote scripts for BBC radio documentaries in the early '80s and, today, writes articles for *The Independent* and the *Observer*. He was named *Mind Journalist* of the Year in 2005.

Most of his books deal with arcane topics. They tell great stories and illustrate artifacts that help us understand our world, especially over time, whether it be by exploring how we communicate with each other via the written word, how we visually understand our world via maps and graphic representations, or, in the case of this book, *All the Knowledge in the World*, what we select, write about and understand as the knowledge of our time-- the elements of our culture in its broadest meaning, our surroundings, and society.

In this book, he zeroed in on the compendium of the knowledge of its time, taking us through the history of these compilations themselves. He tells a fascinating story as he takes us through the history of our history. I appreciate how he has organized the book into 26 Chapters, each beginning with an appropriate letter, arranged alphabetically. He even explains how unusual it was when someone suggested organizing information via alphabetical order.

The first leather-bound set of books was published in August of 1771, and sold for 2 pounds, 10 shillings on plain, and more if on finer paper. The authors consisted of a group calling themselves members of "A Society of Gentlemen in Scotland," numbering about 100 individuals. The task of figuring this out fell to the editor of the first edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica (EB)*, William Smellie, who was a Scotsman deemed a polymath and, according to the historian Herman Kogan, a 'roister' as 'devoted to scholarship as to whiskey.' Smellie and his publishers faced a dilemma that we would not recognize today—the question of just how they should organize such an amount of information in a way that would 'make its compilation rigorous and its reading seamless.' They did select the approach of the English alphabet and were criticized for this approach by many scholars of the day. Garfield takes us deeply into this controversy and also bounces to the topic of the alphabet itself, providing a good history of the concept and history of alphabets.

The book begins with Chapter 1, 'A' or "Aah, here comes Andrew Bell." The Chapter titles are fun. For example, 'B' is for *Backstory*, 'C' is for "Chalcenterocity," and 'F' is for "Fabuleux!"

I particularly appreciate that he ended the book with *Zeitgeist* and included *Wikimania* in the appropriate order.

Along the way, there are some amazing stories of the preceding encyclopedias created around the world before the first *Encyclopedia Britannica*. In Chapter 'D,' which stands for *Damask Silk*, we learn about the *Yongle Dadian*, the biggest and most exacting

encyclopedia ever made, which was, in fact, too large to be printed, created 600 years ago. The book ran 22,937 sections with 11,095 manuscript volumes, each of them between 1-2 inches thick, all bound in the finest of yellow damask silk. We know of this today as several hundred Chinese scholars mention it. Evidently, it was commissioned by the emperor Zhu Di, the third emperor (ruling 1402-1424) of the Ming Dynasty and the creator of the Forbidden City of Beijing. Written by thousands of traveling scholars, the contents emerged with 3.7 million characters on 917,000 pages. Interestingly, Garfield continues with stories of early Chinese encyclopedias called *leishu*, which can be traced to 474 BCE. You'll even learn about the 1790 first modern Chinese encyclopedia devoted entirely to women called *Lianshi*.

He takes the reader through the many iterations of encyclopedias through the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, and into modern times. In the chapter, 'U' -- *Unprecedented*, we learn about the 1974 Britannica, billed as "the first new idea in encyclopedias for 200 years...the encyclopedia that will wear out from use, not from time." A careful read of this time illustrates how editors were attempting to provide information in a more user-friendly approach, but without the technology, which was just around the corner, that of the computer widely disseminated and understood. It is almost painful to read the machinations of thought that went into ways to reorganize information to make its reading 'seamless' in the words of William Smellie.

We learn about the birth of computer technology and the subsequent confusion of editors and managers of Britannica in chapter 'V' for Valedictory. "In June of 1983, the big digital questions descended upon the offices of EB. The sales promotion department met to consider precisely how much of a threat to its business was the computer." A memo documenting the main discussion point reveals the following conversation. "One of the questions we are most frequently asked by both our own people and outsiders is 'When will Britannica be available on a computer?'" The memo notes the answer, which doomed the business, "Not for a long time."

'W' for *Wikimania* takes the reader through the early days of the birth of online encyclopedias, including Bill Gates and the earlier offering of *Encarta*. You'll also learn about the birth of Wikipedia in January 2001. It traces its journey to today, with more than 500 million page views per day and 1 billion unique visitors each month. Its numbers are stunning, with more than 54 million articles in over 270 languages. It is today the 7th most visited site in the world, behind Google, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the Chinese search engine Baidu. There is much to learn in these chapters about our own time and the individuals who make this open-source experiment really work.

I suspect Mr. Smellie would not believe it possible. There is much to learn and appreciate in this book. I highly recommend it!