

P R O F I L E S

RUTH PINCOE, Ontario

Interview by Rachel Rosenberg

I sat down to interview Ruth Pincoe, the new president of IASC/SCAD, with a few questions to hand, but thought I would first share a few details of her life history.

Ruth graduated from the University of Toronto's Faculty of Music in the early 1970s with a Bachelor of Music (History and Literature) and a Master of Arts (Musicology). After leaving school, she worked for short periods at the Toronto Board of Education Historical Collection and at the music library of the Metropolitan Toronto Reference Library (formerly located at St. Clair and Avenue Road). In 1975 she was appointed cataloguer at the Canadian Music Centre, where she worked for seven years. She left in 1982 and began her freelance career as an editor, indexer, and archivist. In the mid 1990s, she spent two years as a part-time student at the Faculty of Library and Information Studies, but finally decided to drop archival work in order to concentrate her efforts on indexing and editing.

In 1982 Ruth also married David Peebles, whom she credits with being a major component of her success. David and Ruth met in 1976, since when he had worked freelance as a technician and jack-of-all-trades, fixing anything with a plug on it, from kettles to theatre lighting. Always literate, David also helped Ruth on many of her freelance projects. This changed about six or seven years ago, when an in-house editor at an educational publishing house called Ruth to say, "I'm sending you a book on electrical wiring because I think David could do it." Now David has a successful career as an editor and Ruth has a colleague in the next office! Both David and Ruth have been awarded the Editors' Association of Canada's Tom Fairley Award for Editorial Excellence: Ruth in 1994, and David in 2002.

Apart from indexing and editing, Ruth's passions include the theatre. She has stage-managed about 50 shows, mainly for the Alumnae Theatre at the corner of Berkeley and Adelaide in Toronto. One of her favourite shows was a production of Timothy Findlay's *Can You See Me Yet?* She is totally mad about walking and hiking, especially in mountains, and she also swims regularly (in the slow lane!) with the University of Toronto swim club the Toronto Masters of the Universe.

This thumbnail biography may shed some light on the questions I posed to Ruth at her local Second Cup:

Editor: When did you realize you wanted to index more than editing or engaging in other of the writing professions?

Ruth: I don't know. I think I literally inherited it from my mother, a professional librarian who worked as a cataloguer. She lived and breathed classification. The Dewey Decimal system dominated our house. When extra milk wouldn't fit into the fridge, there would be a note (on a 3x5 slip) attached to the milk jug that read "See also back shed." [*Editor's note:* Ruth didn't say whether the "See also" was italicized.] This was an accepted way of life that we didn't consider unusual; it was just the way Mother's mind worked. As a child, the concept of classification was a constant companion. I absorbed this way of thinking, not realizing until I sat down to write my first index (about 20 years ago) that I instinctively knew how to do it.

My mother obtained her degree library in 1926, and pursued a long career that included Toronto Public Libraries, the Art Gallery of Toronto (now the AGO), a 10-year stint as head of cataloguing at Etobicoke Public Library, and the Toronto Board of Education. In addition to the extensive library exposure from my mother, I also worked in libraries through my years at university, doing card filing, classification work, and, of course, shelving. I also developed a passionate love for books.

Editor: How did you train for indexing, *vis-à-vis* the skill and the technology involved?

Ruth: Like many others, I first worked as an editor, and one of the many seminars I took from the Freelance Editors' Association of Canada (now EAC) was a day-long course on indexing. I found out about IASC/SCAD and immediately joined. I attended various other IASC meetings and programs, and did a lot of reading, starting with the chapter on indexing in the *Chicago Manual of Style*. Much of my indexing style and technique I have learned from colleagues. You can also learn a lot by teaching, as I found out when Barbara Sale Schon and I taught a book-indexing seminar for the Continuing Education series at the U of T Faculty of Information Studies.

Editor: Describe your favourite indexing project from your early indexing years and most recent times.

Ruth: Well, it's not a book indexing project—actually it was more like online indexing. In the late 1980s I was hired to complete the arrangement and description of the Glenn Gould Papers at the National Library of Canada. This collection included several thousand letters, all of which were catalogued using an early version of InMagic to create records describing

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the subject content of each letter. Developing the controlled language for this project was a real challenge.

Editor: Your love of cookbook indexes must make for an interesting counterpoint to heavier academic indexes you do. Have you come across any favourite cookbooks you'd recommend?

Ruth: *On Cooking: A Textbook of Culinary Fundamentals*, by Anne Labensky et al. I wrote the index for both the first and second Canadian editions. The book is over 1,000 pages, and includes not only detailed instructions for everything from soup stock to crème brûlée, but also a wide variety of haute cuisine designer recipes! The index, set in eight-point type, four columns to a page, is 24 pages long. I like cookbooks because they're fun and because they provide an excellent complement to academic books. I don't seek them out, but I do any that come my way. On a personal level, my favourite—and most used—cookbook is Elizabeth David's classic *French Provincial Cooking*, first published in 1960. Try the onion soup; it doesn't include beef stock and is especially recommended for colds!

Editor: What do you like to read in your spare time?

Ruth: I often read job-related stuff—books on subjects that are close to current projects—both for extra background and for my own interest. These days, I seem to be reading a lot of history, and of course, whodunits (I like the funny ones).

Editor: Have you attended international indexing conferences?

Ruth: I've only been to two international indexing conferences. I was in Vancouver for our joint conference with ASI last June, and I also went to the 2001 ASI conference in Boston in 2001.

Editor: Since there is some controversy about educational programs, how do you feel about the quality of indexers coming from Canadian universities?

Ruth: Nancy Mulvany has expressed the opinion that indexers are born, not made; if a person doesn't have the "indexing gene" it's difficult for them to become a good indexer. I think she has a point, although I'm not entirely happy with this rather exclusionist view. It seems to me learning indexing is really about learning how to think in a particular way. This way of thinking may be very easy for some, and next to impossible for others. I also know it's possible for someone with an aptitude for indexing to write a bad index. This may be why excellent indexers come from a wide variety of backgrounds, and why some have solid professional train-

ing while others are for the most part self-taught. Writing a good index does involve training and craft, but it also requires creativity and inspiration. Really good indexers have both the craft and the creativity. That being said, I'm delighted to see the wide variety of educational opportunities for indexing that are available today.

Editor: What advice do you have for those starting out in indexing?

Ruth: Do really good work, no matter how long it takes you. It is important, right from the beginning, that you take the time to do your best, even if your hourly rate shrinks to a depressingly low figure. You'll pick up speed as you develop your craft, but you need the excellence in order to get the chance to do the second, third, and fourth jobs for your client. If the deadline is short, pass on a project rather than submitting bad work. Take time to edit your indexes, and read your finished product carefully. If you can, have a colleague or a friend read them too. A second pair of eyes (my husband's) helped me a lot when I was starting out.

Editor: How do you perceive publishers are coping with the benefits of a human indexer versus automated, computerized indexing in these days of fiscal tightness?

Ruth: Very badly, I fear. Today, much publishing is big business, focused on the bottom line. I suspect that a lot of business people don't understand what indexers really do. They seem to think an index is something that can be generated by sorting the text alphabetically. True, we can and should be using machines for the drudgery work—copying, sorting, and searching—but people are needed to evaluate and interpret the text, to know when "bottle caps" is just a passing reference, and when it is an important reference to be picked up and analyzed. A computer can tell the difference between 1 and 0, but only human indexers can pick up the shaded meanings that differentiate one set of numbers from another. As an organization I'd like to see IASC/SCAD help to make indexing more visible to the general public.

And with our lattes finished, so was the profile interview.

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