

# Subject Access to Fiction: An Application of the *Guidelines*

Christine DeZelar-Tiedman

*In recent literature, authors have advocated the enhancement of subject access to individual works of fiction. Guidelines were developed and published by the Subcommittee on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, etc. The OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc., and the Library of Congress conducted pilot projects to study the implications of subject cataloging of fiction. Researchers have indicated that while improved access to works of fiction, drama, etc., is desirable, the idea lacks practicality because of the apparent difficulty involved in applying topical headings to works that are not fact-based in nature. Adding to this difficulty is the fact that most fictional works lack indexes, abstracts, and tables of contents, which can aid the cataloger in applying appropriate headings. Exclusive use of dust jacket copy (or back-of-the-book copy for paperbacks) to form fiction subject headings is recommended. The purpose of this study is to determine whether enough information is included on the dust jacket (or the back cover) to provide adequate subject access in the four areas covered in the Guidelines: character, setting, genre or form, and topic.*

From 1986 to 1989, the Subcommittee on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, etc., met to develop a set of guidelines to improve subject access to individual works of fiction, drama, poetry, humor, and folklore in all formats. The guidelines that were established were conceived as a recommendation for standard national practice, and they are based on, but not limited to, the *Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH)*. They appear to be usable, and practicable. The headings are divided into four categories: form or genre access, character access, setting access, and topical access. For the

problematic topical access area, the guidelines state that headings should be determined after a superficial review of the publication at hand. No attempt is made to discern topics that have not been made explicit, or that represent value judgments (*Guidelines* 1990, 33). If subject cataloging of fiction is to become common practice, these guidelines are a strong contender to be the standard of choice.

The subject cataloging of fiction might be the direction we are heading. Over the past few years the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (OCLC), in

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CHRISTINE DEZELAR-TIEDMAN is Catalog Librarian, Assistant Professor, University of Idaho Library, Moscow, Idaho (e-mail: chrisd@drseuss.lib.uidaho.edu). The *Guidelines* referred to herein are the product of the Subcommittee on Subject Access to Individual Works of Fiction, Drama, etc., a subcommittee of the Subject Analysis Committee, Cataloging & Classification Section, Association for Library Collections & Technical Services, a division of the American Library Association. Manuscript received November 8, 1995; accepted for publication January 29, 1996.

conjunction with the Library of Congress (LC), has conducted pilot projects to study the implications of subject cataloging of fiction. Between January and June of 1992, eight libraries, both public and academic, enhanced OCLC fiction records using the *Guidelines*. OCLC then entered each new record into LC's database so that enriched MARC records could eventually be produced (Quinn and Rogers 1992, 14–15). LC followed this by a study of its own in 1993. From April until June of that year, LC monitored the additional time needed to create subject heading assignments and its effect on productivity in order “to determine the desirability of assigning these headings in its own catalog” (LC 1993). In July 1993, the decision was made to continue the cataloging at current levels.

How does a library measure the cost-effectiveness of such a practice? Hayes discusses a study done by LC. Two catalogers were asked to assign subject headings to 25 randomly selected works of fiction according to the ALA guidelines. The surprising result was the disparity in time taken by the two librarians. While the first cataloger spent only 4.3 hours to catalog all 25 items, the second needed 18.3 hours to catalog the same titles (Hayes 1992, 449). Hayes repeated the study using similar methodology. Her results showed more consistency: the two catalogers spent 7.2 hours and 6.3 hours, respectively, to catalog 25 items (Hayes 1992, 453). Unfortunately, neither of these studies addresses the quality of the cataloging that was done. For instance, in the LC experiment, we do not know how many subject headings the fast cataloger applied to each work in comparison to the slow cataloger. In Hayes' study, we do not know whether the headings were applied reasonably consistently between the two catalogers. More to the point of the research project at hand, we do not know what specific methods were used to extract the information necessary to form subject headings for the fictional works.

Hayes gives some detail as to how headings were applied in her study. In the first phase of cataloging each item, the subject, genre, and setting (or settings)

were selected by examining the work, as well as the dust jacket and any introductory material. Topical headings were assigned by adding the subdivision FIC-TION to established headings from the thirteenth edition of *LCSH* (Hayes 1992). But with no specific description of what constitutes an examination of the work, it is easy to see why the results could be so varied.

## BACKGROUND

Fiction has had a troubled past in libraries. Early public libraries grudgingly accepted the presence of novels into their collections, with the hope that readers would be lured to more lofty, worthwhile books—namely, nonfiction (Guard 1991, 10–13). Now that fiction has a well-respected, and expected, place on library shelves, isn't it time that cataloging practice allowed the same type of subject access to these works that has long been available for nonfiction?

This question is not a new one. There have been numerous attempts over the past century to employ various methods of fiction classification, yet none has been successful enough or promoted enough to become standard practice. But with the changes that technology has brought to the world of cataloging, subject cataloging of fictional works has a greater chance than ever before of becoming standard practice. Though it is hard to argue against the benefits that this would have for library users, the question remains in this era of budget cuts and downsizing whether the addition of work and responsibility for catalogers is realistic and cost-effective.

Research, as well as testimony by librarians, indicates that library users do not always seek fiction through known-item author or title searches, which are virtually the only access points available to fiction works under current standard cataloging practice. Olderr (1991, xiii) discussed the difficulties faced by librarians when users, after reading *The Thorn Birds*, wanted “other big novels on Australia,” or asked questions like “Do you have any mysteries set in Iowa?” Commercial

indexes such as Wilson's *Fiction Catalog* are only useful to a limited degree: the user (or librarian) must take an extra step to determine whether an item listed under a given heading is actually held by the library. And users do not always ask for assistance from librarians when seeking library materials. A user not schooled in the intricacies of cataloging would not necessarily know about the lack of subject analysis of fiction. A frequently cited study indicated that when searching online catalogs, users search by subject 73% of the time (Matthews, Lawrence, and Ferguson 1983, 91). It can be assumed that many are searching unsuccessfully for fiction works in this way, and might walk away believing the library does not have what they are seeking.

In addition to providing better access for recreational readers, enhanced fiction cataloging would have ramifications in the academic world. Beghtol (1989, 134) compares the extensive classification of works in science and technology with the more limited categorization in the humanities, and declares that "primary works [i.e. works of literature] are the phenomena of humanistic research in the same way that works of nature are the phenomena of the sciences." Thus creative works should receive the same level of access and attention as their scientific counterparts.

To carry this point further, Ranta (1991, 4) discusses how new trends in literary scholarship and other disciplines "have brought about a greater interest in studying topical and other cultural/historical features of literary texts." Collocating fiction and nonfiction works on related topics in the catalog might facilitate an interdisciplinary search. For example, a student of literature could retrieve factual historical works related to an author or novel, and a historian could access representative fiction of a time and place he or she is studying.

Despite all the arguments in favor of enhanced fiction cataloging, there are legitimate reasons it has not become common practice. Foremost is the nature of fiction itself: unlike most nonfiction works, it can be difficult to determine

exactly what a piece of fiction is about. Nonfiction books regularly contain tables of contents and indexes, and their titles usually offer some clue as to subject content (Ranta 1991, 10). This is rarely true with fiction. Most problematic is the issue of topics or themes. As Hayes explains, fictional works can exist on several different levels at once: the literal, the symbolic, and the thematic (Hayes 1992, 445). In fact, it can be stated that the purpose of fiction is not to lay out ideas or topics in a literal manner, but to reveal them slowly through character, plot, and setting. Catalogers might need to rely heavily on book reviews and literary criticism to correctly classify a fiction work. As Ranta suggests, some people might object that such subject cataloging would verge too much upon literary scholarship and criticism, fields for which most catalogers are unqualified (Ranta 1991, 10). However, she goes on to argue that catalogers have traditionally been trusted to apply headings in subject areas they have no expertise in, and expectations should be no different with fiction. The question remains whether such in-depth subject analysis is realistic in today's library.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to determine the feasibility of routine subject cataloging of fiction and drama. Specifically, we want to know whether dust jacket copy, or back-of-book copy on paperbacks, provides enough information to apply subject headings to fictional works using the *Guidelines*. Without abstracts, indexes, and tables of contents to guide them, fiction catalogers might feel compelled to skim or read sections of the work at hand in order to apply appropriate headings. Nancy Down, writing of Bowling Green State University's experience participating in the OCLC/LC Fiction Project, mentions browsing through novels and reading passages from various chapters (Down 1995, 61-69). This is potentially problematic because of its time consuming nature, and also because some catalogers might attempt to dig deeper to find

thematic or topical elements. By limiting catalogers to dust jacket copy, will only those elements that are truly essential to and encompassing of the work be reflected as access points?

This study was designed to learn:

1. Whether dust jackets carry enough information to effectively apply subject headings for works of fiction; and,
2. How many headings of each type outlined in the *Guidelines* would typically be assigned using dust jacket copy?

In order to determine whether subject headings that encompass the subject content of the work can be formulated from dust jacket copy while adequately covering the four areas in the *Guidelines* (genre, character, setting, topic) as appropriate, the researcher separated new works of fiction, drama, and poetry from the cataloging workflow as they came into the University of Idaho (UI) Library. This method was used, rather than extracting a sample from the existing collection, because the UI Library does not retain dust jacket copy except for a small selection of works that are in the Browsing Collection. Because this is a convenience sample, the results obtained here cannot be generalized to other samples or populations. In contrast to earlier studies, individual poetry collections and dramatic works were included in the sample.

Once the works were selected, subject headings were applied as outlined in the *Guidelines*. The 18th edition of *LCSH* was used to apply setting and topical headings,

and all headings were verified in the LC subject and name authority files. Once the target number of fifty works was reached, the results were tabulated.

## RESULTS

The sample consisted of 26 hardcover books and 24 paperbacks. Of these, the vast majority (43) were novels, with 5 poetic works and 2 works of drama also included. The distribution of headings per category by format appears in table 1.

It can be seen that topical headings were the type most frequently applied, followed by genre headings, settings, and finally, characters. The low incidence of character access is not surprising, because the guidelines state that character headings are only to be applied when a character has appeared in three or more works, or is a real or historic figure used fictionally. Therefore, it is not expected that character headings will be applied to all fictional works. Topical headings were most often applied. The relatively high incidence of topical headings can be attributed to the fact that many books contained several themes or topics, resulting in the application of as many as three or four headings per title in this category. As for genre access, not every work of fiction falls neatly into a genre category; many mainstream fiction works do not exhibit a genre, and others can fall into two or more. For example, a fictionalized biography could be considered to be both biographical fiction and historical fiction.

Except for the genre category, hard-

TABLE 1  
AVERAGE NUMBER OF HEADINGS APPLIED PER RECORD BY FORMAT

Category	Hardcover	Paperback
Genre	0.81	1.04
Character	0.42	0.38
Setting	0.77	0.54
Topic	1.81	1.04
Total headings per record	3.81	3.00

TABLE 2

AVERAGE NUMBER OF HEADINGS APPLIED PER CATEGORY BY LITERARY FORM

Category	Fiction	Poetry	Drama
Genre	0.95	0.60	1.00
Character	0.37	0.00	2.00
Setting	0.67	0.20	1.50
Topic	1.53	1.00	1.00
Total headings per record	3.53	1.80	5.50

cover books appeared to offer more information than paperbacks. This might be because the dust jacket sleeve provides more physical space than the back of the typical mass-market paperback. Several paperbacks gave only brief, one-paragraph descriptions of the work, followed by excerpts from reviews of the authors' previous works. Little of this was useful in applying subject headings. There were a few cases where there was no copy on the back of the paperback, but a photograph of the author instead. This seemed more likely to occur when the author was highly popular and well known (e.g., Stephen King or Danielle Steel). However, these books do sometimes include a brief description of the work on one of the first few pages, which could serve as a reasonable substitute. (This substitution was not made for the purposes of this study.)

The average number of headings applied per category for each of the forms encountered (fiction, poetry, and drama) are given in table 2.

More headings were assigned to drama than to poetry. However, the sample is so small that no real conclusions can be drawn from the results. For example, both of the plays in the sample were by the same playwright and issued by the same publisher.

Figure 1 is an example of dust jacket copy from a hardcover novel. From the information provided here, the genre heading DETECTIVE AND MYSTERY STORIES was applied using the *Guidelines*. Because two other novels featuring the lead character are mentioned, and the guidelines state that a character should appear in three or more works to justify a

heading, one was added for HALLEY, SID (FICTITIOUS CHARACTER)—FICTION. The dust jacket mentions no geographic setting for the novel, so no heading was added in that category. Finally, two topical headings were applied: HORSE RACING—FICTION and PRIVATE INVESTIGATORS—FICTION.

Figure 2 is an example of a dramatic work in paperback form. The copy consists of review excerpts and at first glance there is little to aid the cataloger in applying subject headings. But from the second paragraph, one can come up with headings for genre, characters, and setting. The headings applied were: HISTORICAL DRAMA; JOYCE, JAMES, 1882–1941—DRAMA; LENIN, VLADIMIR ILICH, 1870–1924—DRAMA; TZARA, TRISTAN, 1896–1963—DRAMA; and WORLD WAR, 1914–1918—SWITZERLAND—ZURICH—DRAMA.

At least some subject access was provided for most of the works in the sample. Only three works did not give sufficient information to apply any subject headings according to the *Guidelines*: a Stephen King novel, an experimental novel by Louis Aragon, and a collection of poetry by Mary Robinson. The time needed to apply subject headings to the works was not extensive. It took an average of ten to fifteen minutes per book to review the publisher-supplied copy, look for headings in the *Guidelines* and *LCSH*, and verify them in the authority files.

## CONCLUSION

In this study, publisher-supplied copy from dust jackets and the backs of books

usually provided sufficient information to apply subject headings to individual works of fiction, drama, etc. Just how many subject headings are enough is subjective and must be determined by the individual library. As stated above, the method of selecting the sample precludes the results from being generalized to other populations. However, this study should give other libraries information to consider when deciding whether to provide additional subject access to fictional works. In

some cases it would seem appropriate for catalogers to supplement the jacket copy with other easily scanned information, such as lists of characters in plays or preliminary pages in paperback novels. When reviews are readily available, they may also be helpful provided they are brief.

If topics and other elements of works of fiction were as easily identifiable as they are in nonfiction, the *Guidelines* would not be necessary. The purpose of this study is to suggest a method by which the

# COME TO GRIEF DICK FRANCIS

"Few writers have maintained such a high standard of excellence for as long as Dick Francis," writes the *San Diego Union-Tribune*. "[His] genius...is his ability to write suspense from character rather than incident and to find terror in the mundane." In *Come to Grief*, Dick Francis posts another surefire winner.

After constant requests from fans to bring back Sid Halley, the champion jockey turned investigator of *Odds Against* and the breakout thriller *Whip Hand*, Dick Francis does just that in his new novel. Although more than a decade has passed since the publication of *Whip Hand*, little time has elapsed in Sid Halley's life. Still in his mid-thirties, he remains troubled, courageous, unwilling to admit defeat to disabling injury or corruption. Now, though, Sid faces nineties dilemmas and hazards even more serious than those he once faced in horse racing,

(Continued on back flap)

(Continued from front flap)

the passion that cost him his hand, and "the only sport so dangerous that ambulances follow the athletes from start to finish" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*).

"I had this friend that everyone loved," Halley says, "and I put him on trial.... I grieved for the loss of a friendship, for a man who still looked the same but was different, alien...despicable. I could much more easily have grieved for him dead."

Having exposed an adored racing figure as a monster, Sid must testify at the man's trial. But the morning of his appearance, a tragic suicide shatters the proceedings and jars Halley's conscience. Plagued by regret and the suspicion that there's more to the death than has yet come to light, he is catapulted into days of hard, rational investigation, heart-searching torments, and the gravest of perils. Business as usual for Sid...

*Come to Grief* is a stunning successor to *Whip Hand* that does Sid Halley and Dick Francis proud.

**Dick Francis** is the author of many best-selling mysteries, most recently *Wild Horses* and *Decider*, which are set against a racing background. He makes his home in the Caribbean.

# TRAVESTIES

A PLAY BY

## TOM STOPPARD

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"The effect of *Travesties* is intoxicating! It is nothing short of miraculous . . . brilliant, and replete with limericks, puns, word play, contradiction, and paradoxes." These words by Frank Marcus of the *Sunday Telegraph* celebrating the success of Stoppard's play were representative of the ecstatic reception which greeted the stage work at its London opening in 1974.

"Tom Stoppard is not the first man to have noticed that Lenin, James Joyce, and the Dadaist Tristan Tzara were all living in Zurich during the Great War. But what other playwright, with these three revolutionary figure-heads to draw on, would have chosen for his hero a minor British consular official called Henry Carr? . . . From this obscure footnote to *Ulysses* Stoppard has spun out a fantastically elaborate web to snare his three giants in the same play."

—Irving Wardle, *The (London) Times*

"Stoppard has come up with another dazzling display of theatrical sleight-of-mind. . . . The world premiere was an event to excite the intelligence."

—Herbert Kretzmer, *Daily Express*

"A dazzling pyrotechnical feat that combines Wildean pastiche, political history, artistic debate, spoof-remembrance, and song-and-dance in marvelously judicious proportion. It radiates sheer intellectual *joie de vivre*. Exuberant and freewheeling!"

—Michael Billington, *The Guardian*

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Tom Stoppard has occupied a prominent place in the front row of living dramatists ever since the success of his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. His other plays include *The Real Inspector Hound*, *After Magritte*, *Enter a Free Man*, *Jumpers*, and *Dirty Linen*, and he is also the author of the novel *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*.

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Distributed by Publishers Group West



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ISBN 0-8021-5089-6

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*Guidelines* can be applied in an efficient, cost-effective manner, so that valuable cataloging time is not spent searching for topics in works where subjects are not clearly or openly stated. Few libraries have the resources to pay catalogers to read and interpret fiction; perhaps they will find book jacket copy an effective summarizing tool for providing a reasonable level of access to these valuable library materials.

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