

A Profile of Tim Brookes

BY CHUCK ASHTON



ASI member **Chuck Ashton** lives in central Vermont with his wife and about 50,000 honeybees (in a good year). He completed the University of California/Berkeley indexing course and is proprietor of Ashton Indexing (www.AshtonIndexing.com). His areas of expertise are historic preservation and historic architecture, American history, literature and culture, transportation (including hitchhiking) and environmental topics. He recommends "*A Hell of a Place to Lose a Cow*" to anyone of a certain age who ever hitchhiked farther than the corner store in their youth.

[Author's note: English-born Tim Brookes is an author, professor, founder of the Champlain College (Vermont) Publishing Initiative, guitarist and guitar builder, trans-continental hitchhiker (four times), protector of endangered alphabets and a woodcarver. His 13 books include Thirty Percent Chance of Enlightenment, an account of his trip to India to "watch the monsoon come ashore and ...the elaborate, almost mystical art of monsoon forecasting" (Percentage Possibility Publications, 2009). He also wrote "A Hell of a Place to Lose a Cow": An American Hitchhiking Odyssey (Adventure Press, National Geographic Society, 2000) in which he retraced, in 1998, his 1973 cross-country hitchhiking trip on his first visit to America. His most recent book is The Story So Far: Essays on Publishing in the Twenty-First Century.

Let him introduce himself: according to his website he was "...born in a small house in London, of parents who were poor, honest and liked going for very long walks, preferably in the rain. My education consisted of being forced to take written exams every five or six weeks, and eat school lunches of liver and onions—until I got to Oxford, where I had written exams every eight weeks and had lunches of pickled onions and Guinness. This was quite enough to make me flee the country and seek gainful employment in Vermont, where I have lived for 31 years; writing a great deal and trying to grow good raspberries ...my favorite color is russet. If I had my life all over again, I would take more risks, like smuggling the liver out of the dining hall wrapped in my handkerchief." (www.timbrookesinc.com/?page_id=2) He was also a National Public Radio commentator for 20 years.]

*ASI Indexer **Rose Ippolito** (www.indocsindexing.com/welcome/welcome.html) read Thirty Percent Chance... and contacted Brookes to ask if he would mind if she indexed it. He agreed, and she later sent him her index. He posted his reaction on his blog, www.champlaincollegepublishing.com/ on November 9, 2011, under the title, "What About the Worthy Indexer??. Some excerpts:*

Rose...paid scrupulous attention to the book,

not only to every fact and proper noun but also to every nuance and idea inhabiting the shady nooks and crannies of the book's intellectual woodland. It was the kind of attention that makes any author roll over and lie on his back, purring, as if having his belly fur scratched.

I went back to look at Rose's work, sitting modestly at the end of Thirty Percent Chance, and was struck by how the very act of creating categories of thought produces interesting and pregnant juxtapositions. Under "rain," for example (which occurs pretty often, given that it's a book about the monsoon and the spiritual meaning of water), she gives us:

*almanac predictions
animal sense of smell
Cherrapunji as the rainiest place on Earth
colored
first rains of season
flooding, causing
fondness for
harvesting
as holy
rainmaking attempts
rain-worshippers
sickness, causing
trees, affecting
umbrellas
in Vermont
video
virga
words for*

Am I alone in reading that as some kind of skeletal poem. In hearing in that gathering of perceptions a kind of coherence that underlies the entire text even if it may never be articulated or even recognized by the author?

In a way, a word or phrase search stultifies our creation: in pulling out individual terms, it severs the connections that made them

interesting and worthwhile. It works against the very nature of thought, which is connective. A Shakespeare concordance that identifies every occurrence of every word in the great man's work is only useful if we then start connecting those words and ideas again, perhaps in new and interesting ways.

We are more than the sum of our data.

At Rose's suggestion, I interviewed Mr. Brookes in Burlington on behalf of ASI to mine his thoughts on publishing, indexing, and indexers. CHA]

Metaphorically wearing his author's hat, Tim Brookes smiles as he describes being asked, for the first time, his permission to index one of his books. "It was sort of like the first time I ever had a pedicure... While it was going on I was thinking, 'Why on earth did I ever have a prejudice against this? It's somebody giving me the kind of attention I never even knew I wanted.' Although Brookes has written 13 books, none was originally published with an index. Why not? "It never occurred to me to think of indexing. I have always associated indexes with books that took an academic approach to their subject," he says, "and I am the least academic Assistant Professor you're ever going to meet."

Brookes certainly looks the part. He arrived at our meeting in a downtown coffee house by bike, dressed for a November ride in Vermont — a flannel shirt (maybe two), pants tucked into his socks, and his laptop computer in his backpack. No sign of an Assistant Professor's uniform or insignia.

It would be an understatement to say that Tim Brookes has an unconventional view of publishing. "New York is the Detroit of the printed word," he says bluntly and without equivocation. In his view, a publishing house is like a castle, willfully resistant to change. Calling it a "house" is apt: it implies walls, gatekeepers, and "insiders" distinct from "outsiders." Extending the analogy, he pictures the publishing industry as a castle beside a Scottish loch, and he says what's really going on in publishing is not occurring inside the castle, but beneath the surface of the water. If you want to know what's really happening, go outside the castle, row out on the loch and dive in and swim around, or throw interesting questions out and see what swims over and what they have to say.

From his perch at the head of the Champlain College Publishing Initiative (CCPI) — deep in his allegorical loch — he is bringing change to publishing in ways that the old-line publishing houses probably don't even see coming. He founded the Initiative three years ago, following a meeting in which it was point-

ed out that everything in publishing and media is changing so rapidly that unless you are part of the change you are not only behind, but increasingly behind, and unless you are part of the change you won't understand the change because you'll be seeing it from the outside. One example: A friend decided to see how fast he could self-publish a book. The result was *Sniff It First & 15 Other Things I Learned From My Cat* (Jay Heinrichs, www.blurb.com/books/301718), and the answer to the question was about six hours. Another example: *Thirty Percent Chance*... was originally "published" serially, by subscription, by a nearby National Public Radio station as a fundraiser. Paid subscribers were e-mailed a chapter or two every week (after which the book had no physical form. "More like performance art than a book," says Brookes). *Thirty Percent Chance*... would become the first trade book undertaken by the CCPI intended for a general market.

The Initiative is a publishing services enterprise, staffed by Champlain College students who learn copy editing, layout, design, and all the other steps necessary to take a book from manuscript to the point where it is ready to be sent to the printer, or posted on line, or made available as an e-book. Its mission is self-avowedly "...to play an active part in the great experiment that is contemporary publishing... It's not a question of 'How can we keep up with what everyone else is doing?'. It's a question of 'What can we try that nobody else is doing?'" In practice, this means he challenges his students to do things they don't know how to do, then stays out of their way while they are doing them. He says he will tell them, "Do you know how to do so-and-so? I need you to figure it out by Wednesday." In the fall semester he gathered his students and told them, "I don't know how to do an e-book conversion but I want you to find out." Brookes lights the fuse and stands back. As he puts it, "If you give a bright 19- or 20-year-old a task that they can make their own and that has identity and impact in the real world, not only will they learn stuff they would never learn in the class, but they commit themselves to the process to a degree that they would never think of doing in regular classes. It gives them a real sense of value. They will do anything, both for the book and just because they want to know how to do something." Initially the group published books that the students would use in their classes but has since broadened its scope (the Initiative's on-line bookstore is at www.champlaincollegepublishing.com/?page_id=276).

With the advent of the Internet and print-on-demand, where a finished manuscript can become a printed book in about a week and at a cost of less than \$10, publishing has

gone from the exclusive, gated Ivy League or castle-on-the-loch model to one of inclusivity, where anyone with something to say can publish it, on paper or on line. Brookes sees two natural results of this: first, no one who is self-publishing a book in a week is going to spend the time and money to have it indexed professionally. Second, the concept of a printed book as a static, finished product disappears and is replaced by the next printing, which is always just one upload away. In his words, "Publishing used to be about creating a product; now it's about starting a conversation.."

In this context, where everything is available on the Internet — he calls it the "electronic Wild West" — and retrievable in fragments (minus its meaning) via search engines, Brookes asks *ASI Key Words* readers: Who are the indexers of the Internet? He has two partial answers to this. The first, unwittingly, are the content aggregators, the people who make lists of their favorite things, things they like (to distinguish them from everything else, by default the things they don't like). He cited the example of Molly McGlew, a Champlain student who is passionate about fashion, snowboarding and art. She surfs the web and posts links to sites that interest her on these topics. She has built up such a devoted following — the people for whom she is the unwitting indexer — that snowboarding apparel manufacturers now send her their promotional materials directly, knowing that she will publicize it to a welcoming audience. The second is a type of software we have all encountered: It happens when we are about to finish placing an order on a website and we are presented with a screen captioned "You might also like these.... Brookes notes that, not unlike a back-of-the-book index, this software is making connections for us between things we are thinking about and things we might not even know exist.

And the future of publishing? "Nobody knows the answers, there's no book you can read. The excitement of being involved in publishing now is being in the middle of it where everything is moving and changing.. But it is a safe bet that when publishing arrives at the future, Tim Brookes will already be there, saying "I've been expecting you, but what took you so long?." ●