Trivial Reference Books
A bagatelle from David Isaacson, Assistant Head of Central Reference

Most of the reference questions that university reference librarians receive are serious. Students, professors, and other patrons seldom take time to joke about their assignments or research. Nevertheless, on occasion we do get questions that remind me of the game of "Trivial Pursuit." Fortunately, there are a number of reference books that help to answer questions about trivia or questions that might strike some people as trivial in nature. This feuilleton shall call your attention to a few of the titles. These books were usually compiled with the general public as well as the reference librarian in mind. While they are organized, as good reference books should be, for the quick retrieval of information, these books also invite leisurely browsing.

Recently, I was able to answer a question that was clearly trivial. In fact, the questioner seemed to have two motives in asking the question. Although she was genuinely curious about the answer, she also thought she might stump me. The question: Why do telephone cords often have twists in them? Well, according to David Feldman's Why Do Dogs Have Wet Noses? and Other Imponderables of Everyday Life (Harper Perennial, 1990), this is because right-handed people typically transfer the phone to their left ear in order to free their right hand to do other things. When they put the phone back on the "hook," they have added a twist to the cord.

Probably the best known reference book devoted to trivia is the Guinness Book of World Records (Bantam Books, 1993), although it should be acknowledged that trivia is in the eye of the reader—some of the bets that this book has settled are anything but trivial.

Western Michigan University has the distinction of being cited in this book for the longest telephone call on record: 1,000 hours from March 12 to April 23, 1975. Students worked in shifts for 41 days, 12 hours, to raise funds for a medical center to treat burns. Guinness doesn't say who paid for the call!

Some reference books are predominantly serious with some trivial information mixed in. One reference war horse, Facts About the Presidents (6th ed., H.W. Wilson, 1993) compiled by the nonagenarian Joseph Nathan Kane, besides listing thousands of solemn facts, such as the birth places and ages at death of each president, also tells us that one of the favorite foods of our fattest President, Taft, was turtle soup.

No one's name is trivial to the person or to the parents that named him or her, but one of the oddest books in our reference collection is Sue Browder's The New Age Baby Name Book (Workman, 1978). There are a good many dictionaries devoted to tracing the origins of first and last names, but this is one of the very few that inform us that the Hawaiian name for a second-born child is Kekona—the entry does not note whether this is male, female, or gender-neutral.

In truth, I have never used Alberto Manguel's The Dictionary of Imaginary Places (Expanded ed., Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987) to answer an actual reference question, but this would be the definitive source to find detailed descriptions, often accompanied by maps, of made-up literary locales, such as the island of Houyhnhnms, inhabited mainly by horses, discovered by Lemuel Gulliver, and described in Jonathan Swift's famed Gulliver's Travels.

Dozens of reference books about the movies are eminently browsable and often amusing to read. One of my favorites is David Thomson's A Biographical Dictionary of Film (Knopf, 1994). This third edition is chock-full of Thomson's deliciously witty opinions. Here, for instance, is the first sentence in the entry for Sigourney Weaver: "Lofty, droll, ready for surprise, smart, attractive, and plainly desperate for comedy, Sigourney Weaver has a robust reasonableness worth bearing in mind when other actresses kill themselves, ascend the Olympus of vanity, or disgrace the human race" (p. 797).

Almost everyone knows about standard quotations books such as John Bartlett's Familiar Quotations (16th ed., Little, Brown, 1992), but few are familiar with highly specialized quotation books, such as Jonathon Green's The Cynic's Lexicon...
Trivial Reference Books
Continued from page 1

(St. Martin’s Press, 1984). Not every book of quotations would include such gems as this comment by George Lichtenberg, German physicist and writer: “He who is in love with himself has at least this advantage—he won’t encounter many rivals” (p. 122).

Every library has numerous books devoted to explaining punctuation rules. Only Karen Elizabeth Gordon, however, in The Well-Tempered Sentence: A Punctuation Handbook for the Innocent, the Eager, and the Doomed (Ticknor & Fields, 1983) makes a game out of this chore. Here, for instance is how she defines a common point: “A comma is used to set off conjunctive adverbs, such as however, moreover, etc., and transitional adverbs.” She then illustrates, “We hate your ideas; however, we will give them proper consideration” (p. 53).

 Thousands of specialized reference dictionaries exist, but one of my favorite genres is dictionaries of unusual words. For instance, George Stone Saussy III, in The Logodaedalian’s Dictionary of Interesting and Unusual Words (University of South Carolina Press, 1989) may be one of the few authors who will assist the reader to discover that his or her vocabulary is incomplete without a word meaning the ability to coin new words, such as “logodaedalian.”

Some quite non-trivial, and even solemnly serious reference books include entries that are unintentionally humorous. On a slow day at the reference desk, for instance, I hope I am forgiven for browsing the index to the U.S. Department of Labor’s famous Dictionary of Occupational Titles (4th ed., 1991). Just a few of the actual names for legitimate jobs in this country included among many thousands in this work are: suction-dredge pipe-line placing supervisor, continuous pillow-case cutter, upset-welding-machine operator, and ticket-chopper assembler.

And so goes the search for the insignificant fact or figure. All of the books mentioned above can be found on the shelves of the central reference collection in Waldo Library. They exist for your edification—and also for your amusement. Browsers are just as welcome as users with long faces! 

D.I.

Information Literacy
Continued from page 2

from a librarian at the reference service points found in different locations in the library system (science, government publications, music, rare books, education, regional history, etc.). The University’s off-campus centers are also sites for instruction; students in Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, and other centers are taught by a faculty librarian who is exclusively assigned to provide reference and instruction for these students.

The age-old image of the library as a repository of books is no longer an accurate image. With technological advances, the library has become a gateway to information in all formats—not just within its walls—but to information on networks that extend throughout the world. To help students and other patrons to learn how to access, retrieve, manage, and evaluate the information that they find is a primary mission of the University Libraries at Western Michigan University. The library, as President Haenicke tells the student who uses the hypermedia tutorial, “is the heart of the academic institution.” At the center of that heart is the mission to educate its users!

J.A.