The entries are alphabetical, ranging in length from a half-page for lesser personalities to several pages for entries on topics such as judges, the Qur'an, or political theory. A great deal of thought seems to have gone into the many cross references, and while illustrations are not plentiful, those included are useful. Each volume includes a list of entries arranged both alphabetically and thematically, and the introduction appears in both volumes. The index is extensive and extremely thorough, coming in at fifty-five pages in length. Index topics that have their own entries are italicized, while others have any page numbers listed in which that topic is mentioned. This extensive index should prove valuable to those searching for subjects that are not given their own entry in this work.

The user most likely to make use of this title is the generalist, one whose grasp of the topic is limited and to whom the articles are clearly targeted. For those cases where these entries may be insufficient, or in the case of someone who would like to read further on a given topic, the editors have provided helpful tools. Most entries include extensive “Further Reading” lists, and many include “Studies” lists as well. For those topics where the author has culled the entry from others’ research, a list of primary sources is included.

While those familiar with Islamic studies may find little need for this reference work, Medieval Islamic Civilization will be useful for the general library patron. This work would best be utilized by students in secondary school or college libraries, and by patrons at medium- and large-sized public libraries. This is a well-rounded, well-written set that offers a good starting point for library patrons.—Craig Shufelt, Director, Fort McMurray Public Library, Alberta, Canada


The best reference books fulfill a unique and necessary purpose, giving good value for the dollar. Margaret Drabble’s The Oxford Companion to English Literature (Oxford Univ. Pr., 2000) is a companionable, comprehensive, and inexpensive single volume. Ian Scott-Kilvert’s British Writers (Scribner, 1984) is magisterial, exploring the traditional and evolving literary canon in lengthy essays on individual authors. Although expensive, the work effectively manages the subject in a core set of volumes with supplements. The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature can be compared to these and to other established reference titles in English literature.

In approximately 500 signed essays, The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature attempts to reflect the “great range and depth” of the literature of the UK and the Republic of Ireland since Anglo-Saxon times. The set’s organizers observe that British literature “still remains at the heart of the commitment to the humanities in English-speaking countries, not least the United States” (xi). Questions about depth, completeness, and balance naturally arise, and the preface is quick to mention that topic selections “no doubt reflect” the organizers’ own “knowledge, interests, and judgments” (xi). Unlike Drabble’s The Oxford Companion to English Literature,


With Medieval Islamic Civilization, the editors hope to fill what they see as a lack of a “single reference work that presents Islamic civilization in a manner intelligible to the nonspecialist” (xi). With this two-volume set, the latest in a series of Middle Ages–focused encyclopedias from Routledge, they have created a thorough and accessible reference tool for general inquiries on the topic.

There are numerous titles in existence on the topic of Islam during medieval times, but the great majority of them focus on politics and philosophy. With this general work, the editors cover more than five hundred topics, including concepts and ideas, people, geographic locations, and other items. For a work produced by more than 250 people, the entries are uniformly excellent. The editors have aimed for dispassionate writing, and that goal is achieved without having the entries become dull. Besides being devoid of subjectivity, the entries are also written in a straightforward and accessible manner, and the contributors attempt to explain concepts in the simplest terms possible.