

Reference Books

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Editor

American Icons. Ed. by Dennis R. Hall and Susan Grove Hall. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. 3 vols. alkaline \$225 (ISBN 0-275-98421-4).

American culture scholars and pop culture junkies rejoice! *American Icons* is a collection suitable for studying or just browsing, and it has something for everyone. Editors Dennis R. Hall (a professor) and Susan Grove Hall (an independent scholar and author) put together a collection of slightly more than one hundred entries that explore some of the people (Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, Tiger Woods), places (Coney Island, Niagara Falls), and things (Barbie, the tattoo, Underground Railroad, Viagra) that have influenced American culture and how other countries view America. These icons may elicit good, bad, or indifferent responses, but they are all familiar. Even if you're not a fan of Oprah Winfrey and her various pursuits, you know who she is, and you can learn more about her in this work.

The editors asked contributors to write essays that would "reveal an icon's origins and changes, its influences, and the meaning of its enduring appeal—and repulsive reactions" (xviii). The results are both enlightening and entertaining. Each entry contains a detailed and engaging essay, black-and-white photos or illustrations, and a list of cited and recommended works. The set concludes with a selective bibliography and a detailed index.

Considering the massive number of possible entries, *American Icons* is quite selective, and people are sure to debate why certain things were deemed icons when others were not. Libraries may already own the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (2000) and be tempted to pass on *American Icons*, but doing so would be remiss. The former casts a wider net and has more than 2,700 entries, but the latter delves into much more detail.

Some of the subjects chosen for the cover artwork are curious (Jack Nicholson instead of Elvis Presley?) or confusing (Is the white picket fence supposed to symbolize suburbia?)—let's hope people are smart enough to not judge this book by its cover.

This collection is highly recommended and appropriate for high school and college students as well as the general public.—Samantha J. Gust, *Reference Librarian, Niagara University Library, New York*

Building the World: An Encyclopedia of the Great Engineering Projects in History. By Frank P. Davidson and Kathleen L. Brooke. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2006. 2 vols. alkaline \$199.95 (ISBN 0-313-33354-8).

Building the World has a unique approach to describing forty-one major projects undertaken by mankind throughout history. In treating the building projects, from Solomon's Temple in Israel to the Big Dig in Boston, the authors emphasize macroengineering, their field of expertise. They define macroengineering in the preface as a term denoting large and complex technical projects that not only require huge human, economic, and materials resources but also have a major impact on the environment and society.

Each entry follows a set pattern: a brief set of facts ("Did You Know . . .?"), history, cultural context, building, importance in history, and references for further reading, which include books and articles, Internet resources, and even cultural works such as music, films, and television productions. Of the latter, some seemed a bit far-fetched in illustrating the widespread cultural effects of the project. For example Yo Yo Ma's recording *Silk Road Journeys: When Strangers Meet* (Sony Classical, 2002) was listed following discussion of the Grand Canal in China because the Silk Road is likened to the Grand Canal as a route of cultural as well as economic exchange. In fairness, these resources were intended for further exploration and not for in-depth research.

Building the World illustrates many considerations of macroengineering, such as the decision process and the circumstances leading to project execution. Each entry concludes with authorizing documents such as congressional records, treaties, contracts, or other historic accounts. A cast of fifty-three persons listed in the acknowledgments provided documentary research and translations of texts. These primary materials enable the reader to step right into history. The documents can be dry reading, but they nevertheless illustrate the complexity of such projects and how they were initiated and managed.

The second volume of *Building the World* features a bibliography compiling the references from each entry. It is not clear whether these sources were used to derive the information for each entry, or whether they are simply for enrichment. The second volume also features a detailed index for finding specific persons, places, entities, and structures.

Most books on large-scale projects describe a single project, address young readers, treat only the building process, or analyze a single aspect such as management or environmental impact. *The Seventy Wonders of the Ancient World: The Great Monuments and How They Were Built* (Thames and Hudson, 1999) does treat a vast array of projects, albeit from the ancient world only. Entries average slightly more than four pages each, whereas *Building the World* averages more than twenty-one pages per entry, a longer treatment by far. Much of the length can be attributed to the authorizing documents that set this work apart.

Building the World was meant to provide a "greater understanding of the role such structures have played not just in the transformation of the physical world, but in the growth and development of societies and cultures" (xi). The editors have met this goal, and have done so for audiences ranging

from high school students to professionals and from artists to diplomats. The encyclopedia reads easily and is suitable for public and academic libraries alike, including technical libraries. It was disappointing to see “Industrial engineering” as the sole subject heading for this work, because it covers so much more.—*Dorothy F. Byers, Head, Engineering Library, University of Cincinnati, Ohio*

Chemical Compounds. Ed. by Neil Schlager, Jayne Weisblatt, and David E. Newton. New York: UXL, 2006. 3 vols. alkaline \$172 (ISBN 1-4144-0150-7).

This three-volume set, aimed at younger researchers, could provide the first details of chemistry and chemical compounds to pique the interest of a future scientist. The set covers 180 common chemical compounds, both organic and inorganic, along with a few common mixtures such as petrolatum and gelatin. Each four-to-five page article includes scientific names (with pronunciation), structural pictures (both line and ball-and-stick models), synonyms, basic physical properties, descriptions of the chemical’s discovery, summaries of major ways to produce it, known or possible hazards, and major uses. Sidebars in all articles give “Key Facts,” “Interesting Facts,” and “Words to Know.” The references following the articles tend to be largely Web sites accessed within the last year but often with the long complicated addresses that accompany such sites. Their reliability varies, running the gamut from Material Safety Data Sheets to government information sites, corporate sites, and electronic versions of articles.

Comprehensive tables of contents, glossaries, a timeline, appendixes, and indexes appear in all volumes, a nice convenience. In addition to the subject index, three types of indexes for the compounds exist: formulas, elements, and type. The awkwardly arranged formula index serves only to confuse. Students attempting to use this index would have a hard time finding what they needed. The elements index simply lists the compounds under each element contained in them, a much easier index for this age group. The type index catalogs all compounds under headings such as “Acids,” “Bases,” “Alkanes,” and “Phenols.” The bibliography section (for further information), located in the appendix, is divided into “Books,” “Periodicals,” and “Web sites” lists. Of forty-two items listed under “Periodicals,” only about sixteen are scientific journals; the rest are from popular literature. For many of these items, it is impossible to tell which chemical is being discussed, as many titles of the articles are not specific. The lists appear to have been compiled directly from the references at the end of each article. The helpful comprehensive “Web sites” will assist in locating reliable sites for finding chemical information, as general chemical information sites are featured.

This set is designed to complement Newton’s *Chemical Elements* (UXL, 2000) and to provide understandable chemical compound information to students from middle school and up. Recommended for middle or high school libraries and public libraries. Not recommended for academic

libraries.—*Marion S. Muskiewicz, Science Reference Librarian, University of Massachusetts, Lowell*

Concise Major 21st-Century Writers: A Selection of Sketches from Contemporary Authors. Ed. by Tracey L. Matthews. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2006. 5 vols. \$469 (ISBN 0-7876-7539-3).

Concise Major 21st-Century Writers is a shortened version of Thomson Gale’s *Major 21st-Century Writers* (2004), a title available only as an e-book. An advisory panel, including librarians and teachers, helped to select sketches from the larger work and added thirty emerging authors to these selections, for a collection of seven hundred writers. These writers were chosen for their relevance in middle school, high school, and college-level classroom discussions. Care was taken to represent various nationalities, ethnicities, and major genres in fiction and nonfiction. As its subtitle states, all sketches found in *Concise Major 21st-Century Writers* are available in Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Authors* series.

Typical of the sketches found in *Contemporary Authors*, the approach is descriptive rather than analytical. Each entry provides a quick overview of a writer’s life and bibliography, emphasizing plot summaries, inspirations, and the critical receptions of individual titles. These observations are gathered largely from trade, popular, and substantive news periodicals. The source lists cite items found in other series by Thomson Gale. This is helpful because students requiring more scholarly approaches to a writer will need to consult these other series.

The practice of gathering together insights about curriculum-related authors is nothing new. Among the established sets of this type are those by Salem Press, which recently revised the titles formerly edited by Frank N. Magill. These are Philip K. Jason’s *Critical Survey of Poetry* (2003), Charles E. May’s *Critical Survey of Short Fiction* (2001), Carl Rollyson’s *Critical Survey of Drama* (2003), and Rollyson’s *Critical Survey of Long Fiction* (2000). Through uniquely written and signed essays on individual authors and complementary volumes of topic essays, resources, and indexes, the Salem titles provide much deeper critical contexts. Patrick O’Neil’s *Great World Writers: Twentieth Century* (Marshall Cavendish, 2004) and Michael D. Sharp’s *Popular Contemporary Writers* (Marshall Cavendish, 2006) are illustrated with works of art to reflect the multiple-intelligences approach used in high schools. With perhaps the exception of indexes by nationality, ethnicity, genre, and subject, there is little of added value in *Concise Major 21st-Century Writers*.

It is hard to see a purpose for *Concise Major 21st-Century Writers*. Most libraries offer guides that do a better job of presenting authors read in schools. Most libraries carry *Contemporary Authors* and its related series. Clifford Thompson’s ongoing *World Authors 1995–2000* (Wilson, 2003) is a staple for discovering contemporary writers as they emerge or reemerge into prominence. Those who offer Thomson Gale’s immense data file electronically through Literature Resource Center have numerous possibilities for cross-searching the variety of series and approaches to writers. Avoid this unnecessary and