

ACCURACY OF REFERENCE SOURCES:

THE EXAMPLE OF BALZAC

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A great deal of discussion is taking place these days on electronic bulletin boards, such as PACS-L, about the accuracy of information which is presented on such electronic networks. Some participants in this discussion feel that access to information is crucial and that the end user should be the one to decide what value or use the data/information has. Many others believe that our role as librarians or information specialists require that we examine and evaluate the material, and in some manner, screen it. This dialogue on "the objective, careful application of qualitative professional judgements to the quality of information resources,"¹ while newly pertinent in the electronic environment, needs to be considered in a more traditional one as well.

Here is a typical scenario at the reference desk:

-Hello, I am interested in finding Balzac's birth and death dates.

-Honore de Balzac, the French novelist?

-That's right.

-And do you need just the years of his birth and death, or the exact date?

-I'd like the actual day, if we can find it.

-That should be no problem. Let's check in the encyclopedia.

Going to the encyclopedia case and taking down the Encyclopedia Americana, we find that Balzac was born in Tours on May 16, 1799 and died in Paris on August 17, 1850.² And so an appropriate reference source is identified, and another reference question is negotiated and answered, improving that library's accuracy level, perhaps even lifting it above the famous 55% rate. EXCEPT for a couple of things: Honore de Balzac certainly was not born on May 16, and probably did not die on August 17.

Background

In the summer of 1990, while preparing an entry on Balzac for a biographical dictionary of European historical figures, I needed to obtain a large number of chronological facts about his life: eg. the dates he published certain important novels, the year he married, the date of his father's death. Two of the most important, most basic dates, of course, are his birth and death dates.

Normally a patron seeking this type of information would consult some standard reference tool--an encyclopedia, a biographical source--and assume that the facts found therein were correct. Because I was gathering a variety of sources from which to write my own text, I could compare the accuracy of information found in each of these works. What I discovered was not a little disconcerting for one in the information-provision business: a number of standard, generally (even widely) respected sources contained inaccuracies and occasionally internal discrepancies concerning the simplest type of factual data.

Results

Usually, and particularly in centuries past, determining a famous person's birth date is more difficult than his death date.

After all, who can know, and thus record, which infants will become the leaders, or heroes, or celebrities of their generation? On the other hand, one would expect that the death of the most noted French novelist of the mid-nineteenth century would be clearly and accurately mentioned in many sources, both primary and secondary. This is simply not the case. Information about both his marriage in 1850 and his death later that year is incorrect in a distressingly large number of reference tools.

Honore de Balzac was born in late eighteenth-century France at a time when a revolutionary calendar temporarily replaced the standard Gregorian one. Under the new system, his date of birth

was 1 Prairial An VII (Year 7), or May 20, 1799. Among the sources consulted for this project, only one had this date wrong; it was nevertheless a standard multi-volume encyclopedia found in any public or academic library.³

Balzac, who had suffered heart attacks in 1849, was very ill when he returned to Paris from eastern Europe the following year with his wife Madame Hanska. They had been married near her family estate in Ukraine on March 14, 1850. Biographical sources and encyclopedias do not always report this event correctly, placing it too close or too far from his death. One states the wedding occurred on May 14,⁴ another states "In 1850 [Madame Hanska] became his wife, and three months later, Balzac died,"⁵ and a French source says Balzac "épouse [Madame Hanska] en mars 1850, mais meurt six mois apres," giving him six, rather than five, months of married life.⁶

Balzac in fact died late on Sunday, August 18, having been seen by his friend and colleague Victor Hugo earlier in the evening. Only his mother was at his side, his wife having retired earlier. Hugo, in his Choses vues, describes his visit to the deathbed, as well as the funeral the following Wednesday, (at which he gave a powerful eulogy):

"Le 18 aout 1850, ma femme, qui avait ete dans la journee pour voir Mme de Balzac, me dit que M. de Balzac se mourait. J'y courus. . . . Il mourut dans la nuit. Il

avait cinquante et un ans. On l'enterra le mercredi."⁷

Two contemporary Parisian dailies, Le Moniteur Universel and Le Journal des Debats, reported his death correctly, and, with much more detail, his funeral on the 21st.⁸ Several newspapers in fact carried the complete text of Hugo's speech. From the very start, however, other sources had difficulty reporting this event accurately. In its August 21 issue, the Times of London states, in a column labeled "Express from Paris (by electric telegraph)," that Balzac, "the celebrated writer, died in Paris on Saturday night."⁹ That was in fact the 17th, a day early. Three years later, the Nouvelle Biographie Universelle, (later called Nouvelle Biographie Generale) stated that he had died on August 20.¹⁰

The legendary eleventh edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica contains an article on Balzac written by George Saintsbury. It reads in part:

"On Sunday, the 17th of August, Victor Hugo found Balzac dying . . . He actually died at half-past eleven that night and was buried on the 20th . . ."¹¹

Beyond the inaccuracy, this entry is curious because in two earlier editions of Balzac's complete works, which Saintsbury

edited and introduced, the death date is given, in the prefatory biographies, as the 18th, (although in one his birth date is given as May 16th!)

Stefan Zweig's work on Balzac, originally published in German in 1946, is considered to be one of the early major biographies of the writer. The English translation, which appeared the same year, states (in the body of the text) that Balzac died on the 17th and was buried five days later.¹² The chronological appendix, on the other hand, nine pages later, corrects the death date but leaves the funeral on the 22nd, still a day late.¹³

The Twayne World Author Series is a standard set for high school and academic libraries; the Balzac volume is held by approximately 750 libraries in the United States, according to OCLC. Here again, however, there is considerable confusion, in this case between the text and the chronology at the front of the volume. The latter gives Balzac's correct marriage date (March 14, 1850) but indicates he died on the 21st, while the former provides a correct death date but says he was married in May.¹⁴

DISCUSSION, OR SO WHAT?

Unfortunately, the situation concerning Balzac is not unique. While preparing a similar entry for Wassily Kandinsky, I discovered a certain confusion about his birth date (due to

differences between the Julian and Gregorian calendars), and references in a 1989 encyclopedia which mentioned paintings still owned by his widow in Neuilly, France, when in fact she had been murdered in Switzerland in 1980.¹⁵

The lack of accuracy can cause a variety of problems, of varying degrees of seriousness. Sometimes they are minor, such as the misspelling of a reference in the bibliography of an article in the International Encyclopedia of Communications, which temporarily leads a patron to believe that the cited work was not available in our library. In another example, a group in Texas has found over 5,000 errors in a group of ten textbooks being considered for adoption in the public schools.¹⁶ While many of the errors were indexing mistakes, some were much more substantive; relating the use of the atomic bomb to the end of the Korean War does skew one's understanding of the modern world!

Furthermore, in other, more technical or scientific areas of knowledge, accuracy of information can be crucial. Recently, the Petit Larousse dictionary had to be recalled when a number of poisonous mushroom species were mistakenly labeled as edible.

What then is to be made of all these facts, and what is their importance? The simplest and most basic comment is that editing of reference books and other monographs should be done more carefully, in order to eliminate the internal inconsistencies and out-of-date information pointed out above. We, as librarians, should be alert to inaccuracies and be sure to

point them out to publishers. (Our review sources, such as Choice, often indicate these editorial shortcomings to potential purchasers and, one hopes, to producers of such works.)

More importantly, does it matter if a death date from a century and a half ago is not exactly right? In the case of Balzac, total precision certainly does not affect our global understanding or appreciation of him and his literary genius; he remains the leading novelist of mid-nineteenth-century France. (On the other hand, it might be useful to know with accuracy the date of his wedding if one were analyzing his comments on marriage.) Perhaps reference sources should adopt the stance of the Universal Pronouncing Dictionary of Biography and Mythology (1915) which simply says that Balzac was born in May, 1799 and died in August, 1850.¹⁷ Even more simply (and safely), the World Book Encyclopedia states "(1799-1850)."¹⁸ The editors of the World Book understand that, for the vast majority of their readers, the year of Balzac's birth or death will provide information sufficient for their needs.

Accuracy is one important area of concern when determining the usefulness of reference sources. Any reference book can justifiably have restrictions (geographical, chronological, or other) on the information it presents, which should be clearly enumerated by the book's authors. There may also be judgments and biases which are less explicit. Librarians should be attuned to all these elements of the sources they offer to their

clientele. They also need to know the degree of accuracy that clientele requires and select suitable reference works accordingly. Given that supposedly reliable reference books may contain errors from time to time, the reference interview thus becomes more important than ever. And if absolute accuracy is needed, consultation of more than one source may be on occasion necessary. Reference librarians need to be ever-vigilant about the quality of the information they provide, no matter what the format. In so doing they ensure that patrons will be using the most current and accurate sources available.

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