

On Acknowledgments, the Inquisition Was Easier

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words)

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Last time, it was the dedication. My book was already at the printer when the editor called to say I had forgotten to dedicate it to anyone. So without thinking I dedicated the book to my 82-year-old mother. When I ceremoniously presented her with the bound galleys, she cried. So did my wife, not so much because she hadn't been chosen but because she wasn't consulted. She has never read the book.

When it came time to dedicate another book, I was determined to get it right. "To My Wife" seemed too impersonal. "To Marie Salerno" seemed too formal, and also might imply that there was some other Marie to whom I had considered dedicating the book. So I settled on "To Marie," and everyone seemed happy. Until they noticed the acknowledgments.

Authors have been struggling with them for at least 500 years. Phoebe Peacock, a classics reference specialist at the Library of Congress, explains that the common practice among early authors was not necessarily to acknowledge any intellectual contributions that enhanced their work, but to thank their financial benefactors (much as authors now acknowledge their agents, I guess) or to endear themselves to potential patrons. This form of acknowledgment was called an *impensis*, Latin for "at the expense of." (Thanks, Phoebe.)

Another type of acknowledgment common in the 16th and 17th centuries was a prudent bow to the official body, religious or secular, that licensed the printing of the book. That form is known as an *imprimatur*, for "let it be printed." Prof. Niklaus Largier of the

German department at the [University of California, Berkeley](#), suggests (thanks, Niklaus) that acknowledgments later flourished in academic writing and publishing, particularly in doctoral dissertations, for strategic reasons.

Aspiring academics, he said, would thank teachers, parents, grant makers and others to "emphasize that they depend on an academic network and that they belong to it."

It's gotten worse. Professor Largier says: "The author of an academic book often lays out his entire academic network in the 'acknowledgment,' emphasizing not only aspects of professional gratitude but also emotional relationships: friendships, hardships, help. Thus, 'acknowledgments' tend more and more to include partners, family, friends, even pets, blurring the traditional difference between the public and the private aspects of the book."

Take Meryle Secrest's biography of Frank Lloyd Wright. "Four main foundations and research centers are cited at the beginning of Secrest's acknowledgment section, followed by 19 persons who receive great gratitude," Dan Pinck, an author and former spy, noted in *The American Scholar*. "Fourteen Wright descendants who have been just as generous with their time come next; then 100 persons who gave invaluable help, followed by a layer of 91 institutions and organizations, including magazines, newspapers, art galleries, colleges and universities, public libraries, and theological schools, which all helped in various ways." With 634 pages and many more acknowledgments, Mr. Pinck calculated the acknowledgment-per-page index at 0.62.

In contrast, Mr. Pinck estimated, the comparable index in David McCullough's 1,117-page biography of Harry S. Truman is only 0.16. Secrest is outdone, though, by Kitty Kelley, who acknowledged 795 people in her unauthorized biography of Nancy Reagan, for an index of 1.3.

Similarly, in reviewing "The New York Intellectuals," David Oshinsky wrote that Alan M. Wald "begins with the longest list of acknowledgments I've ever seen," adding, perhaps wistfully: "If half of these people actually buy the book, Mr. Wald will have a best seller on his hands."

As a literary form, the humorist Henry Alford has written, the book acknowledgment has evolved -- or devolved -- from "the dowdy, benighted foot soldier of an author's arsenal" into "its full efflorescence." Dave Eggers expanded the genre to a confessional, acknowledging that he always thought Evelyn Waugh was a woman and George Eliot a man. (He begins "A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius" by mischievously

acknowledging "his friends at [NASA](#) and the United States Marine Corps.") Thom Jones thanked two pharmaceutical companies for expanding his "narrow channel of joy."

In "Living by the Word," Alice Walker thanks the flowers and trees "and, most especially, the animals," a citation, Mr. Alford suggests, that "can only prompt a reader to check the cover of his book for evidence of gnawing." Bob Woodward thanks 250 people for helping him write "The Secret Wards of the C.I.A." but says he can't reveal who they are.

Ben Cheever finds two faults with acknowledgments. "The first is that the very act of acknowledgment seems to suggest that something has been accomplished," he wrote in his own acknowledgments. "The second great difficulty with acknowledgment pages is that they are all so damn cheerful. Every woman cherishes her husband, every writer, his publisher. Or her publisher, as the case may be. The children, if mentioned, seem to have spent years tiptoeing around in felt slippers, presenting trays of tea and toast to the invalid genius. Who are these people? Acknowledgments often leave me with the impression that I've been lied to."

In "Schott's Original Miscellany," the author, Ben Schott, shares blame in his acknowledgments with about three dozen people and concludes: "To them my thanks are

due for suggestions, advice, encouragement, expert opinions and other such things. If glaring errors exist within this book, it's probably their fault."

Paul Neuthaler, one of the friends I thanked in my latest book, complained -- facetiously, I thought at first -- that people mentioned in the acknowledgments weren't listed in the index, too. I say facetiously at first, because later he also complained that he wasn't afforded his own paragraph.

On the same book, "The Brother: The Untold Story of Atomic Spy David Greenglass and

How He Sent His Sister, Ethel Rosenberg, to the Electric Chair" ([Random House](#), 2001), another friend, Richard Mittenhal, joked -- I thought -- that while he was happy to be included, so many people were mentioned that maybe I should have saved space by listing only those who had not helped. My sister-in-law sobbed when she couldn't find her name. That's because it wasn't there. What, I said, trying hard to couch the question empathetically, had she done to merit a mention? "I always asked you how the book was coming," she replied.

Then there's the friend of 25 years who not only asked frequently how the book was coming but who also was genuinely interested and who I knew would be delighted to be publicly acknowledged. During an argument about another matter altogether, my wife told her that the only reason she had been included was so her feelings wouldn't be hurt. They haven't talked since.

[Illustration]

Drawing (Drawing by P. C. Vey)