

NOTABLE FOR NOT BEING NOTABLE

“Richard, you’re famous!”

“I am? How so?”

I was talking to Belle Randall, in Seattle. She had phoned to tell me that I was mentioned in *The New York Review of Books*, in a review by Nicholson Baker of a book entitled *Wikipedia: The Missing Manual* by John Broughton (Pogue Press/O’Reilly, 2008). More than a book review, Baker, who is a respected novelist, had written a very informative and entertaining essay, “The Charms of Wikipedia” (Vol. 55, No. 4, March 20, 2008, www.nybooks.com/articles/21131). It begins: “Wikipedia is just an incredible thing. It’s fact-encirclingly huge and it’s idiosyncratic, careful, messy, funny, shocking, and full of simmering controversies—and it’s free, and it’s fast.”

He goes on to relate the background of this online encyclopedia, how it evolved, how it’s structured, and how for some people it has become a fascinating project. For Baker, it became a mission.

The uniqueness of Wikipedia is that it is a reference work written by strangers who contribute anonymous articles on any subject they wish—or re-write articles or vandalize them. Beginning in 2001, in eight years, Wikipedia amassed over two million articles on diverse subjects, all written without editorial oversight. “It worked and grew,” said Baker, “because it tapped into the heretofore unmarshaled energies of the uncredentialed.” I, too, had been intrigued by this openness, and in a blatant act of self-promotion, I created a page for myself. I did not read the rules or follow the guidelines for creating my page. I designed my page by entering the “edit” area on the page of another, more famous poet and copied the formatting codes. Voilà, I had a profile on Wikipedia.

In his essay, Baker mentions that Broughton’s manual is useful in keeping one from breaking wiki-rules but he notes that the original rule endorsed by the founders was: “Ignore all rules.” In this spirit, I proceeded. It wasn’t long before a notice appeared on my page that tagged my profile as a “stub,” and I realized that there were wiki-elves at work behind the screen. The term “stub” meant that the article was short and needed help.

So, I expanded my profile to include a short bibliography, and Jonathan Penton, my webmaster, added a couple of links. Unbeknownst to me, the halcyon days of just offering information for the sheer joy of adding your two-cents worth were over, and delitionists were on guard. Soon, my profile was tagged “not-notable.”

Baker designates himself as an inclusionist. He makes edits to improve and expand articles, and he is protective of articles which he believes have merit, that are slated for deletion. He tells how he became a crusader:

But the work that really drew me in was trying to save articles from deletion. This became my chosen mission. Here’s how it happened. I read a short article on a post-Beat poet and small press editor named Richard Denner, who had been a student in Berkeley in the Sixties and then, after some lost years, had published many chapbooks on a handpress in the Pacific Northwest. The article was proposed for deletion by a user named Pirate Mink, who claimed that Denner wasn’t a notable figure, whatever that means. (There are quires, reams, bales of controversy over

what constitutes notability in Wikipedia: nobody will ever sort it out.) Another user, Stormbaly, agreed with Pirate-Mink: no third party sources, ergo not notable.

Denner was in serious trouble. I tried to make the article less deletable by incorporating a quote from an interview in the Berkeley Daily Planet—Denner told the reporter that in the Sixties he'd tried to be a street poet, "using magic markers to write on napkins at Café Med for espressos, on girls' arms and feet." (If an article bristles with some quotes from external sources these may, like the bushy hairs on a caterpillar, make it harder to kill.) And I voted "keep" on the deletion-discussion page, pointing out that many poets publish only chapbooks: "What harm does it do anyone or anything to keep this entry?"

An administrator named Nakon—one of about a thousand peer-nominated volunteer administrators—took a minute to survey the two "delete" votes and my "keep" vote and then killed the article. Denner was gone.

Notable/not-notable...endless argument. Baker claims, "...a lot of good work-verifiable, informative, brain-leapingly strange—is being cast out of this paperless, indefinitely expandable accordion folder by people who have a narrow, almost grade-schoolish notion of what sort of curiosity an on-line encyclopedia will be able to satisfy in the years to come."

What led up to my profile's demise? One doesn't often get to see the various elements in a sequence of events, from cause to effect, but on-line in virtual reality the record is there. Here is a bit of the history retrieved from Wikipedia.Org/wiki/User:Balloonman/afd/Richard_Denner:

Note: This debate has been included in the list of Poetry- deletion discussions.----pb<talk>18:24, 18 January 2008 (UTC)

I've been pondering the notability of this person and I can't decide whether there should be a Wikipedia article about this subject or not. There seems to be some claims to notability in the article, but I can't find any reliable third party sources to back them up (most of the current sources seem to be unreliable or edited by the subject of the article), searching for the two listed books brings up little or nothing, and one them appears to be self-published. –Pirate-Mink 15:04, 17 January 2008 (UTC)

DELETE I agree with the lack of reliable third party sources. I will revisit this discussion if some (any) good sources are posted.---Stormbay (talk) 04:00, 22 January 2008 (UTC)

KEEP The man is a publisher and a poet with an extensive bibliography, part of the sixties Berkeley scene. Many poets publish on chapbooks—there is a long and rich tradition of this. What harm does it do to anyone or anything to keep this entry?---Wageless (talk) 03:51, 23 January 2008 (UTC)

Wikipedia Deletion review/Log/2008February

RICHARD DENNER (edit/talk/history/links/watch/logs)

This article about a poet who was deleted last month based on Wikipedia:Articlesfordeletion/Richard_Denner. The sparse discussion consisted of the nomination, one person who supported deletion (but said they would "revisit this discussion if some (any) good sources are posted"), and one person who wanted the article kept. This last person also added some material to the article, including an additional source—the article already had several sources, but these weren't considered sufficiently "third-party"—but

neither of the other two, nor the closing administrator, seems to have noticed this. Based on, I guess, a calculation that this is 2-1 in favor of deletion, the discussion was closed as “delete”. Now in the first place, I disagree and think that at a minimum, the nomination should have been relisted for more discussion. The failure to consider new evidence also means the arguments for deletion need to be re-evaluated. Fortunately, the person trying to save this article happens to be Nicholson Baker, and took time to write about this in *The New York Review of Books*. So, arguably the article could have yet another source now. Poetry often languishes in obscurity, making research challenging for those who don’t know their way around, but let’s not compound the problem in this case.---Michael Snow (talk) 18:15, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

Standard gripe about no apparent discussion with the deleting admin before bringing it here. Many of these sort of cases should be resolvable with a little discussion.---81.104.39.63 (talk) 18:53, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

Many see us as a scary desk sergeant or whatnot. Regardless, here we are.---Dhartung (talk) 23:26, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, there was no consensus. The nominator said “I’m not sure if...” the only delete comment was hesitant and said “if sources...” and the keep was fairly confident it should be kept. There was no elaboration in the closing statement as to how the outcome arrived at delete. Closing as delete was a mistake.---Jerry (talk) 21:32, 29 February 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, lack of consensus, this should be relisted and given another chance.---Mbimmler (talk) 17:54, 1 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, I thought it was a quick delete. I suspect that only marginal notability exists but the article deserves due process.---Stormbay (talk) 21:06, 1 March 2008 (UTC)

> Hi, I know Richard and found his page when people were beginning to assert his lack of notability (I did not participate in the deletion debate). My comments on the talk page, where I disclose my conflict of interest and add a couple of sources, are presumably visible to admins. At that time, it is mentioned that Richard started his own page. If it would be helpful, I can start a page for him from scratch.---JonathanPenton (talk) 03:39, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, Came here from NYRB as well. Which I suspect now serves as an additional source.---Relatarefero (talk) 09:53, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

OVERTURN, insufficient consensus to delete the article. I would have relisted the debate.--Hut8.5, (talk) 10:37, 2 March 2008 (UTC)

And so, I was back—a cause célèbre figure. I wanted to thank Nicholson Baker. I left a message at his fan club site: “I would like to thank you for coming to my defense in your book review, *The Charms of Wikipedia*. It was very well-written, entertaining and thought-provoking. On a personal note, being a Buddhist monk, I am charmed to be notable for not being notable.” He replied by email: “I wish I had your Buddhist attitude toward literary vicissitudes.”