

# John Culleton

John Culleton uses  $\TeX$  in his indexing and typesetting business. He also participates in various Internet-based discussion groups related to printing and publishing where he is vocal about using  $\TeX$  for typesetting.

[Interview completed 2 December 2006.]



*Dave Walden, interviewer:* Please tell me a bit about yourself and your life before you got involved in publishing and with  $\TeX$ .

**John Culleton, interviewee:** Well, it has been a long life! I worked for 23 years for the Social Security Administration in Baltimore, in two stretches. During the first stretch, when I was in Financial Management, I asked for a nine month summary of certain financial numbers. The programmer told me he couldn't do it, then I asked for quarterly summaries. Same answer. I asked why. He told me I wouldn't understand. So I decided to become a computer programmer.

After almost three years in the private sector as a programmer, system analyst and manager of programmers I returned to SSA. In the course of those remaining years I dealt with some small systems and became acquainted with Unix. After retiring from paid employment I fiddled with some Linux systems. When I took over the publication of a Breeder Directory for the local kennel club my typesetting choices were Groff and  $\LaTeX$ . I chose  $\LaTeX$ . I put the breeders in a DBMS and generated the  $\LaTeX$  code through some little Perl programs.

*DW:* It is not clear to me from your Wexford Press (<http://wexfordpress.com>) web site if you got involved with publishing at the same time as you got involved with  $\TeX$  or earlier. Please tell me about the sequence of events of your getting involved with publishing and with  $\TeX$ .

**JC:** First came  $\TeX$  —  $\LaTeX$  and later plain  $\TeX$  with the Breeder Directory. Then, looking around for a lucrative hobby I began indexing for money. My method of indexing was and perhaps still is unique. I convert a PDF file to plain text, saving the page breaks, then insert Eplain syle indexing tags, and then run the file through plain  $\TeX$ . I keep the generated index and discard the rest. This gives me the advantage of embedded indexing (no page number errors) without the tears of, e.g., MS Word. The transition to typesetting for fun and profit (small amount of each) was a natural progression.

Like everyone I dreamt of publishing a book someday, which led me to Pub-forum and later [self-publishing@yahoogroups.com](mailto:self-publishing@yahoogroups.com).

*DW:* While I first came across your name in one of the T<sub>E</sub>X discussion groups, I really became aware of you when I joined the Yahoo-based Self-Publishing discussion group of which you are one of the three owners and moderators and a frequent contributor yourself. Please tell me about your involvement in this discussion group and your motivations related to and for it.

*JC:* As indicated before, the sequence was Linux, Breeder Directory, T<sub>E</sub>X, indexing, the publishing mailing lists, including `self-publishing@yahoogroups.com`. When the `self-publishing` list lost their moderator suddenly, I volunteered to take it on. I recruited some assistants, who after a while fell by the wayside. Then I had the great good fortune to recruit J.C. Simonds (<http://www.beaglebay.com/>) and Marion Gropen (<http://www.gropenassoc.com/>) as assistants. I decided that to keep these bright and energetic people on board I had to treat them as equals and not assistants. They are great friends and neat associates. I met them in person just once, when BEA (Book Expo of America) came to Washington, DC.

I also ran a book review for a couple of years which gave me review copies of books on self-publishing. I bought some more, plus books on typesetting and so on. I now have about 30 such books within arms' reach of my computer workstation. By reading books and also reading posts I became a kind of curbside expert on self-publishing.

Technically we don't own `self-publishing@yahoogroups.com`. It is owned by SPAN, Small Publishing Association of North America. SPAN was founded by self-publishing authors Tom and Marilyn Ross and the administration later passed to Scott Floria. He seldom injects himself in the management of the list. Now and then we call on him to decide a difficult case.

Because of my tireless championing of T<sub>E</sub>X on the mailing lists I have become known as a T<sub>E</sub>X "guru" on those lists, which will no doubt be the cause of great hilarity on, e.g., `comp.text.tex`, among the real experts. I am of course a perpetual amateur, but that is not a bad thing. When I say something foolish I can look forward to a savage correction by some of the experts, but in the process I learn something. As a married man I have been yelled at by an expert. I can take the `comp.text.tex` critiques in stride.

*DW:* As you champion T<sub>E</sub>X, what arguments do you give them for using T<sub>E</sub>X, and what do you recommend to people who are interested in trying T<sub>E</sub>X about how to best get up to speed with it?

*JC:* First I suggest that they read "A Gentle Introduction to T<sub>E</sub>X" by Michael Doob. Although this was written before we had PDF output it gives the essentials in user-friendly form. For those interested in highly formatted books such as textbooks I recommend "T<sub>E</sub>X, an Excursion" by Hans Hagen et al. I am writing my own e-book on the use of T<sub>E</sub>X for novels but I never seem to find time to finish it. I should add that I do not use or recommend L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X. Its verbosity and multiple sources for commands turns me off, and may turn off others.

*DW:* How about the first part of my question: What arguments do you give for using T<sub>E</sub>X, or do you not argue for it but just emphasize from time to time that you use T<sub>E</sub>X rather than InDesign, QuarkXPress, etc., which other self-publishers are always talking about.

*JC:* I do a little of both. I mention T<sub>E</sub>X as a quality typesetting engine. I mention that the H&J routines of InDesign are taken from T<sub>E</sub>X. I note that "T<sub>E</sub>X is free, which is too expensive for many." I mention the online support from various mailing lists which often involves the author of the macro in question, not some underpaid telephone answerer

with a copy of a manual. I mention that upgrades are free. I mention that the document source format is plain text with embedded tags. I mention that very old files are still processable in  $\TeX$ . I mention that  $\TeX$  cannot destroy your source file, even if you kick the plug out of the wall in mid-process. I mention that an editor plus  $\TeX$  plus a PDF viewer is the truest form of WYSIWYG.

I do not try to sugar coat the learning curve with  $\TeX$ . But all new software has a learning curve.

*DW:* How about the reverse? What would you say to people already interested in  $\TeX$  about the advantages and disadvantages of self-publishing, how to best go about it, and how it compares with the  $\TeX$ -rejection reactions one often gets when trying to get something  $\TeX$ -based published by traditional publishers?

*JC:* Most printers accept a PDF file for the book interior. Since  $\TeX$  prepares well-formed PDF files with fonts embedded, etc., there is no problem with the submission to the printer or publisher. In self-publishing getting published is the easy part. Selling the book in an era when over 100,000 titles are added each year is the hard part. I also push for people to do their homework by reading some books. I have an annotated book list, almost a set of mini-reviews, at <http://wexfordpress.com/tex/shortlist.pdf>.

I also warn people away from subsidy publishers such as iUniverse, Authorhouse, Infinity and so on. There are new ones popping up every day. They make it easy to publish but almost impossible to sell books. I do suggest as a more sensible alternative the use of a good book coach or consultant. My list of these is at <http://wexfordpress.com/tex/packagegers.pdf>.

*DW:* What is your  $\TeX$  setup—distribution, editor, formats you typically use, major packages, etc. Would this change if you were writing a book yourself rather than typesetting someone else's book? If someone hires you to typeset a book written in MS Word or InDesign, how do you proceed, and what sort of electronic files do you return to the author?

*JC:* I have a Slackware Linux system. I use Gvim exclusively as my text editor. I have a few shortcuts that I have assigned to F keys. I simplify matters by putting each book in its own subdirectory. The master file is always called `book.tex`. It is my main file which calls subfiles, such as `macros.tex`, `half.tex`, `title.tex`, `copy.tex`, `ack.tex`, `body.tex` and so on for the different pieces of the book. Often I just copy the `.tex` files from an earlier project and then insert new material. Each project is unique but the unique material is inserted into a common base structure. With the use of F keys I can compile and/or display the book from the Gvim window. By displaying the PDF file using `xpdf` I can update that window with a single keystroke `r`. This gives me a semi-WYSIWYG approach.

My customers almost always submit work in MS Word `.doc` format. Often I convert the `.doc` file to `rtf` in OpenOffice, then run `rtf2latex2e`, then edit out or replace the  $\LaTeX$  tags with mass changes in Gvim. I only use `pdf $\epsilon$ -TeX` or `Con $\TeX$ t`.

Another technique where italics are not frequent is to just save the file as plain text. It becomes my `body.tex` file.

In plain  $\TeX$  and indexing I use `eplain.tex`. I use the table building routines from TeXsys for things like invoices. Interested parties can obtain sample code by writing me at [type@wexfordpress.com](mailto:type@wexfordpress.com).

My typesetting customers get a PDF file of the interior. My indexing customers get an ASCII file derived from my `.ind`. No printer has had trouble with any of my PDF files.

*DW*: How do you see  $\text{\TeX}$  faring in the continuing increase in the popularity and dominance of systems such as Word, InDesign, etc.?

*JC*:  $\text{\TeX}$  enjoyed a heyday of sorts with the academic presses. That is fading as more alternatives are brought forward. But newer versions of  $\text{\TeX}$ , such as pdf $\text{\TeX}$  and Con $\text{\TeX}$ t, offer clear advantages over word processors. With respect to preparing PDF files, Word is playing catchup. And Word, InDesign and their ilk remind me of the poem: When they are good they are very very good and when they are bad they are horrid. It is hard for one person to debug remotely another's problem with a WYSIWYG product, but it is easy for one person to view a code snippet and perceive the hidden flaw. I get help all the time on `comp.text.tex` and the Con $\text{\TeX}$ t mailing list.

Indirectly the growing acceptance of open source software such as Linux, Apache and so on has paved the way for  $\text{\TeX}$  as an open source publishing program.

*DW*: What do you think the user groups, e.g., TUG, should be doing to better promote people's (particularly self-publishing people's) use of  $\text{\TeX}$ ? Could there be some more explicit effort, e.g., a  $\text{\TeX}$  introduction or course at a self-publishing conference? You became involved in  $\text{\TeX}$  because you had a publishing project in what I presume was a hobby area having to do with your local kennel club; I am also reminded of Joe Hogg's work with  $\text{\TeX}$  (<http://tug.org/pracjourn/2006-3/hogg/>) in the area of his hobby as a docent at the Los Angeles Zoo and Botanical Garden. I wonder if perhaps TUG should be volunteering to offer introductions or courses at many different kinds of hobby organizations — many will have some need to typeset and publish something.

*JC*: That might be useful, though it is probably more of a one-on-one thing. I never tried to proselytize the doggie people in  $\text{\TeX}$ . For a club newsletter, MS Word is fine. My approach to the breeder directory, using an RDBMS to store the data and a Perl program to format the output for  $\text{\TeX}$ , was perhaps a bit idiosyncratic. I was after all in my salad days as a programmer. Most doggie people aren't or else have a different programming background than mine.

I suggest an adult education non-credit course in “ $\text{\TeX}$  without tears” could show self-publishers, for example, the way to prepare their novel, etc., in first rate form without expense. It might be worth proposing to the local community college.

*DW*: Or perhaps to an adult education program of the sort where someone can take a course in contract bridge, Chinese cooking, or scrapbooking. And maybe the  $\text{\TeX}$  approach could be a major component in a course on self publishing. Neat idea, John.

With that, I'll say thank you for participating in this interview, and I hope we can meet in person at some point.

*JC*: It would be my pleasure!