

Review of recent L^AT_EX books*

Nico Poppelier

Elsevier Science Publishers
Amsterdam
The Netherlands
n.poppelier@elsevier.nl

*A Guide to L^AT_EX,
Document Preparation for Beginners and Advanced
Users,*

Helmut Kopka and Patrick Daly.
Addison Wesley 1993, 436 pages (including indexes),
ISBN 0-201-56889-6.

*L^AT_EX Line By Line,
Tips and Techniques for Document Processing,*

Antoni Diller.
John Wiley & Sons 1993, 291 pages (including index),
ISBN 0-471-93471-2.

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Whenever I read a book that describes a computer-related topic I ask myself these questions: does this book contain information I haven't seen elsewhere, does it explain things in a way that gives new insights? And I do this especially with books on T_EX or L^AT_EX.

In April 1992 I gave a favourable review of two books about L^AT_EX, two *good* books, written by Helmut Kopka. However, they were written in German, which made them inaccessible to a large portion of the T_EX user community. Fortunately the first of these two books is now available in an English version: *A Guide to L^AT_EX, Document Preparation for Beginners and Advanced Users*. This version was written by Helmut Kopka and his colleague Patrick Daly at the German Max-Planck-Institut für Aeronomie, and is based on the fourth edition of *L^AT_EX, eine Einführung*. The English version is not a mere translation, but an internationalized version, where parts specific to the German language have been replaced by descriptions of, e.g., the new font-selection scheme (NFSS) and the Babel system.

As in the German original, Kopka and Daly follow Lamport's basic notion that with L^AT_EX the user is freed from worrying about the layout while writing a piece of text. *A Guide to L^AT_EX* has chapters on document and page styles, displayed text, mathematical formulas, pictures, user-defined structures and a few advanced features of L^AT_EX. In the appendices the authors treat the letter

document style, including possibilities for customization, BibT_EX, SlT_EX, L^AT_EX extensions, and the CM and DC fonts.

Their book provides a wealth of information, and if the updated English version of the companion volume *L^AT_EX, Possibilities for Extensions* will be published by Addison-Wesley soon enough, there is practically no need for further books about L^AT_EX, since almost everything beginning or advanced users need to know is in one of these two books.

In contrast with this, Antoni Diller does not present L^AT_EX as a system for the production of structured documents. L^AT_EX is a system that emphasizes structure over presentation, and that is ideally suited for the production of many instances of a certain type (class) of document, for example office memoranda or scientific articles. Instead, in *L^AT_EX Line By Line* L^AT_EX is presented as a collection of T_EX macros, with which you can achieve all sorts of effects. Therefore, all examples and explanations in the book use a mix of L^AT_EX commands, plain T_EX commands and T_EX primitives.

There is of course nothing wrong with this approach, if the book is intended as a book on tips and tricks in L^AT_EX and plain T_EX. However, the preface of *L^AT_EX Line By Line* clearly shows that the book is intended as a book for novice users, and attempts to explain *all* about L^AT_EX. In other words: it is intended as 'your first and only book on L^AT_EX'.

There are no glaring errors or omissions in the book, but it lacks structure, and the mix of L^AT_EX, plain T_EX and T_EX primitives will really confuse any novice user. Because of this, *L^AT_EX Line by Line* is not a book for beginners, even though the author writes in the preface 'This book can be read by someone who has no previous knowledge of either L^AT_EX or T_EX.'

In the introduction of this review column I explained what the things are that I am looking for in a new computer book: what makes this book special or unique? What does it explain that I haven't seen before, or in a way I haven't read before? For what special group of people is it written? Antoni Diller's book on L^AT_EX is-

*Published in TUGboat **14.2**, 127–128 (1993).

n't special in any sense; it is just another poorly written book about \LaTeX , of which there are unfortunately a few too many already. *\LaTeX Line by Line* contains a lot of useful tricks, especially in the area of mathematics, but they are presented in an unstructured and confusing way. Also, the title is not appropriate: it is not a book about \LaTeX , but a book about how to combine \LaTeX , plain \TeX and \TeX primitives to achieve certain special effects in layout.

A detail: both books give the old address of the \TeX Users Group (that is a problem with putting addresses and similar factual information in a book).

Another detail: the book by Helmut Kopka and Patrick Daly has the nicest \LaTeX logo I have ever seen – including the one on Lamport's book! No wonder, since the designer at Addison-Wesley called Barbara Beeton and asked her what it should look like. And I must say: she did a very nice job!

The logo on Antoni Diller's book looks horrible, since the 'A' in \LaTeX is *much* too far to the right. Not only that, but it is also reproduced like that many times on the front cover. Add to this the poor design of the book and the fact that it was reproduced from low-resolution output, I am afraid that there is another book about \LaTeX on the market that I cannot recommend.