New books on TEX[1]

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Even though English seems to be understood by just about everyone nowadays[2], TEX books in other languages still serve a useful purpose. Sometimes it looks as if the whole of Germany learned LATEX from Helmut Kopka instead of from Leslie Lamport, and in France Raymond Seroul's *un petit livre de TEX* is very popular. In both cases, the rest of the world is getting a chance to see what it's been missing. Kopka's introductory volume (see elsewhere in this issue) is being translated, and Seroul's book has just appeared, under joint authorship with its translator, Silvio Levy.

A Beginner's Book of TEX (Springer Verlag, New York, 1991, ISBN 0-387-97562-4) is more than just a translation of the earlier book[3]. Levy is described as 'translator-turned-coauthor', and the most visible difference is the incorporation of the features of TEX version 3. The result is a rather handsome volume. For one, the text is very well-written, never feeling like a translation. The worst errors that I found were the misspelling 'wierd' which appears twice; the idiom 'head over heels' is used where something like 'topsy-turvy' was meant, and the reader is told once that by finding an error in TEX 'you'll earn your prize and a place in the official listing of TEX's (former) bugs'. In general, the style of writing is the type of 'dialogue with the reader' that characterizes the TEXbook.

Another good point about the book is the rather open layout. The typefaces used are Times Roman and (its inevitable companion) Helvetica. Choosing these typefaces instead Computer Modern, while in itself not too adventurous, removes the book immediately from the spheres of 'yet another book done with the TEX font'. The Computer Modern family is used to show examples of TEX output. A nice idea, although the effect is sometimes rather subtle, if just a single word of Computer Modern appears in a paragraph of Times.

My only criticism of the layout is that the book itself uses `\parindent=0pt`, so the output of some of the examples is different from what the ordinary user (who sticks to the default value of the indentation) will get. The authors should have made a remark about this, or have prevented this from happening altogether.

The structure of the book is as follows. Chapter 1 is an introduction, chapter 13 is the 'Dictionary and Index', and in between are chapters that each treat an aspect of TEX, for instance modes, glue, paragraphs, math, or TEX programming. Although the final chapter is at 90 pages a generous one, and, well-stocked with examples, more than a mere index, I was most impressed with the expository chapters. They are meant for careful reading through them, rather than for easy reference (although the index refers back to the them), but they contain an amount of information that is very respectable for an introductory book. It pleased me particularly to read the section on modes, a subject that is shunned by all other introductory books on TEX so far. The book contains many examples that illustrate their point well.

Of course, this book doesn't treat everything about TEX. The chapter on page layout has many examples, but, understandable, doesn't go very deep into output routines. The control sequence `\expandafter` appears only in the Dictionary, and even there the reader is told that 'this subtle primitive is not for beginners'.

I have one comment about the Index/Dictionary, and that is that it contains too many irrelevant entries for my taste. It was the authors' idea to make the index refer to the examples 'by content', but it irritates me finding the likes of Humpty Dumpty and Bilbo Baggins

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[1] To be published in TUGboat, © 1991, TEX Users Group.

[2] Maybe excepting the American students who just scored an all-time low for their language abilities on the Scholarly Aptitude Test.

[3] In this reviewers opinion, however, the title has suffered from the translation. The original title had more of a *je ne sais quoi*.

all over the place.

In general, however, I found little to complain about in this book. There are hardly any TEX errors, and the ones that I found are not very serious. The worst error was that the authors claim that the keywords `height`, `depth`, and `width` have to appear in that order, whereas they may appear in any order. A case of misleading information is that the authors repeatedly recommend `\vglue` where the plain format of TEX version 3 has `\topglue`. Some other comments: the authors talk about 'the family `\fam1`' as if it were an identifier like 'the font `\MyFont`', whereas it is an assignment; calling `$` with category 12 an 'active character' because it prints as a dollar (page 173) is an unfortunate choice

of words; and the reason that there are 18 `mu` to a quad may be an obscure one, but it is not 'only known to Knuth' as the authors state: the division of a quad in 18 basic units has been the standard for Monotype equipment for ages (this fact also appears in the space of the computer modern fonts: for the roman font the space is 1/3em plus 1/6em minus 1/9em).

All of this is minor squabbling. This book does an admirable job of bringing together in single chapters enough information about topics in TEX for a starting TEXer to be able to 'typeset just about any document'. It is superb as an introductory reading text, and the Dictionary/Index can be used for reference later on.