Review of ‘Making \TeX Work’

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Title : Making \TeX Work
Author : Norman Walsh
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I have recently received a review copy of Making \TeX Work, by Norman Walsh (published by O’Reilly Associates). From my perspective, I am a somewhat to rather sophisticated user of \LaTeX/\TeX. Making \TeX Work (MTW) is another book along the lines of The \LaTeX Companion (TLC). MTW takes a wider view of the entire \TeX/\LaTeX enterprise than does TLC, in that MTW involves editing, plotting, and all the aspects of using \TeX, rather than TLC, which involves merely \LaTeX. The chapter titles for MTW are The Big Picture, Editing, Running \TeX, Macro Packages, Fonts, Pictures and Figures, International Considerations, Printing, Previewing, Online Documentation, Introducing METAFONT, Bibliographies, (Tools) Non-Commercial Environments, Commercial Environments, \TeX on the Mac.

Generally, I like the book and have found it to be useful. From the user standpoint, it is probably most useful for the somewhat naive, but somewhat experienced user. For instance, consider the chapter on Editors. Subheaders are What can an editor do?, GNU Emacs, AUC-\TeX, MultiEdit, Brief, MICROEmacs, emm++; Other Tools, \TeX as a compiler, Spellchecking, Revision Control, \TeX Shells. The first sections discuss various capabilities of editors. I found the section on GNU Emacs and AUC-\TeX to be most helpful, not being familiar with AUC-\TeX prior to reading the book (although I was an emacs user for a long while). The other editors are discussed as well at the same level - very interesting for the person not familiar with the product, not enough detail for anyone else.

Similarly with the Fonts chapter. The matter of fonts is exceedingly poorly described in \TeX/\LaTeX as a whole, IMVHO. I did find this chapter describing fonts in a clear and simple fashion. The chapter begins with a discussion of the process by which \TeX locates font information. Some examples of font information are presented. A variety of issues are considered, including magnification, font size, location of font information, and other issues of standard font information. Some more advanced issues are also discussed - NFSS2, Postscript fonts under NFSS, encoding vectors, virtual fonts and automatic font generation. My overall impression is that this information is very helpful to persons like myself who are still a little confused when fonts are discussed. The term “Cork encoding” is defined in the book, although not in this chapter. So, I generally found the information here quite helpful.

I must wrap this up at this point. My overall impression of the book is pretty positive. The author has made a real effort to tie in a lot of disparate pieces of information. This information is all out there, but very hard to pull together. However, the book is not 100 problem is that the book lacks a critical overview, but this is probably not the author’s interest. For instance, in the discussion of \TeX shells, the author mentions 5, but doesn’t spend any time comparing and contrasting. So, if you were trying to select a \TeX shell, you couldn’t just use this book. I guess that I am saying that the book is not the Consumer’s Reports of \TeX stuff, but is that a problem? I dunno. I did find book very helpful at times.

Note: I have no financial interests in O’Reilly and Assoc. I did get the review copy free.