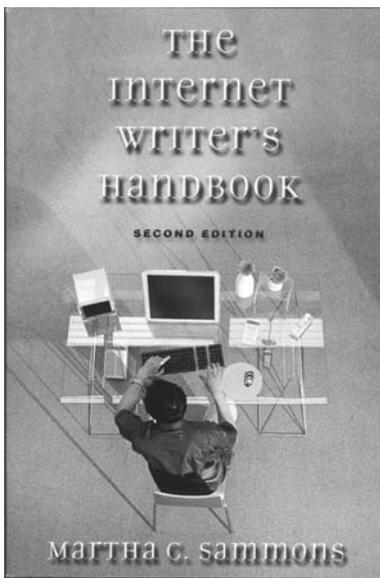


edited by Beth Notzon



THE INTERNET WRITER'S HANDBOOK, SECOND EDITION. MARTHA C SAMMONS. NEW YORK, LONDON: PEARSON LONGMAN; 2004. XIII + 430 PAGES. SOFTCOVER \$44.40. ISBN 0-321-15955-1.

The Internet Writer's Handbook is a great resource for its target audience. The problem is in identifying that target audience and getting the book into the right hands. Its misleading title would lead a reasonable person to believe that it is a handbook for writers. It is not. It is a handbook for Web-site builders who might not be the best writers.

Author Martha C Sammons, a professor of English at Wright State University in Ohio, does offer a few practical lessons in writing ("The subject should agree with the verb." "A pronoun should agree with its antecedent."). Whereas it is hardly the kind of advice a reader of *Science Editor* is likely to need, it is probably great advice for the hard-core computer geek who can program in Java with his or her eyes closed but never bothered to learn how to construct a clear sentence in English. However, the book's real focus is on the proper construction of Web pages and Web sites.

Once the reader gets past the title, the book is filled with useful little nuggets for Web-site builders. From the first law of Web design ("Avoid blinking text") to a brief overview of copyright law, Sammons dispenses hundreds of tips to help her readers avoid some of the heinous atrocities that litter the Web today.

Longtime Web-site builders might not agree with everything Sammons suggests, but her overall philosophy of site design is hard to criticize. For example, she asserts that every Web page should tell readers who created the site, its sponsor and purpose, what kind of information it contains, how often that information is updated, how to navigate, and how to contact the owners or authors of the site. In theory, it might seem like a great idea. However, I cannot find or even imagine a site that follows that advice on every page. That would get annoying in a hurry. It is reasonable to include all that information on a Web site, but not on every page in the site.

Sammons wisely urges site builders to know their audience and to keep in mind the unintended audience that finds their sites by accident. Web surfing is characterized by serendipity, and a designer

never knows who might stumble across a site or what the visitor's native language might be. Thus, humor, cute phrases, and a flashy vocabulary are discouraged in favor of simple, straightforward language. She also helps Net novices avoid making such mistakes as spamming (which includes promoting their Web sites in inappropriate places) and typing in ALL CAPS (considered shouting).

She suggests to her readers that they consider the differences between reading a printed page and reading a computer monitor. Because the "page" on a monitor is oriented horizontally and only holds about one-third as much content as a typical printed page, Web-page designers need to keep brevity in mind. That advice is repeated because the nature of Web surfing leads to the development of a short attention span, so a Web page has a very limited opportunity to grab and hold a reader's attention.

This publication is the second edition of the book Sammons originally wrote 5 years earlier, and the updated version seems to have retained a little more of the old text than it should have. Between the 1999 creation and the 2004 update, astounding changes swept over the Internet and computer technology in general. We no longer live in an online world dominated by 28.8k modems, 640 x 480 monitors, and users tenaciously clinging to their trusted Netscape version 3.01. Thus, some of her advice about file sizes and multimedia applications seems dated, even though the underlying theory (that not all users see a site in the same way) is still good to keep in mind.

The author did make a praiseworthy attempt to create a user-friendly handbook organized in more than 300 entries arranged alphabetically from Abbreviations to "You" Orientation (writing in the second person, especially important for commercial sites). In a layout scheme devised by the author herself, the small chunks of advice are followed by examples, both good and bad, taken from real Web pages. It is not unusual to see a half dozen examples on one page; putting each example or group

of examples in a box results in a cluttered look that draws the reader's eye in too many directions at once and makes the book harder to read than it should be.

She ends the book with some handy lists. She cautions her readers against using 75 common redundant phrases that make editors cringe (such as "actual fact", "join together", and "revert back") and wraps up with a thorough checklist that Web designers would do well to follow.

On the whole, Sammons has penned a helpful handbook for Web-site builders. She just got the title wrong.

David Galloway

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Book Notes

THE BIG ONE. JAKE PAGE AND CHARLES OFFICER, 2004. BOSTON, NEW YORK: HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY; 2004. XII + 239 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$25.00. ISBN 0-618-34150-1.

The Big One couldn't have come out at a better time. With the recent tsunami that affected Southeast Asia, the world's attention is focused more than ever on earthquakes and the devastation they wreak. This small volume starts by recounting one of the worst earthquakes to hit the United States—not the fabled San Francisco earthquake of 1906, but the strange earthquake dubbed the New Madrid Quakes that struck the Mississippi River Valley during December 1811 and the early months of 1812. It was not your typical earthquake with cracks opening up and the earth shaking. Instead, the ground shuddered and undulated. There were sharp explosions, the smell of sulfurous gases, a strange fog that cloaked the area, and flashes of eerie light. Towns were swallowed up by the ground, lakes disappeared, and new lakes appeared where there had once been dry ground. However, although the New Madrid Quakes are described in fascinating detail, the authors of the book, Jake Page and Charles Officer, also use the quake as a lead-in to the history

of seismology. This particular reader was under the impression that the cause of earthquakes has been understood for many more years than is actually the case. In truth, seismology is a new science and an understanding of plate tectonics of recent advent (the 1960s!). Seismology had its beginnings only in the 19th century, with the New Madrid Quakes regarded as one of the seminal events in its founding. The Japanese were soon at the forefront of the science almost out of necessity because of the all-too-frequent violent earthquakes that strike Japan, but important contributions have been made by scientists around the world. The authors do an excellent job of explaining the science of seismology and what is known about earthquakes for the lay reader. The only dissatisfying aspect of the book is that the New Madrid Quakes remains very much a mystery to this day, so the reader is left hanging as to its cause and the sources of its strange manifestations. That, of course, is not the authors' fault, and it is not a reason not to purchase and read the book.

Beth Notzon

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THE EARTH MACHINE: THE SCIENCE OF A DYNAMIC PLANET. EDMOND A MATHEZ AND JAMES D WEBSTER. NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS; 2004. XIV + 335 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$39.95. ISBN 0-231-12578.

This book had its beginnings in the opening of the Gottesman Hall of Planet Earth (HOPE) in the American Museum of Natural History, which is part of the Smithsonian Institution. It is not a guide to the exhibit itself, although one may strongly desire to visit the exhibit while or soon after reading the book. As the authors explain in the preface, the book is “a more detailed version of the story told in HOPE”. It is really geology, seismology, biology, volcanology, oceanography, alpine research, and every other earth science all in one volume. The product is a thorough and yet easy-to-understand account of the origins of Earth and the staggeringly impressive confluence of events that not only brought about but continue to promote life on Earth. The book is in several

sections that take a chronologic look at how Earth formed, the continents evolved, the atmosphere and natural resources formed, and life evolved. It also examines some of the cataclysmic events that have affected Earth and how without them we would not be who and where we are today. The book is attractively designed, laid out, and illustrated. For the reader who wants to labor through a little more of the science or details of a particular topic, there are asides within chapters on such topics as “a menu for microbes”, “dating materials with carbon-14”, and “how basaltic lava forms”, to name but a few. The authors definitely know their stuff. Edmond Mathez is curator of petrology and James D Webster is curator of mineral deposits in the Department of Earth and Planetary Sciences of the museum. But true to their vocations as educators, as well as scientists, they do more than just educate in this volume; they also thoroughly entertain.

Beth Notzon

HEALERS AND HEROES: ORDINARY PEOPLE IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES. CLIF CLEAVELAND. PHILADELPHIA, PA: AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS; 2004. XI + 180 PAGES. HARDCOVER \$25.00. ISBN 1-929129-00-9.

In this book, physician Clif Cleaveland writes about 12 of his heroes, people who responded to a variety of challenges—including racism, war, and disease—with compassion, dignity, and courage. Cleaveland describes how all these people, whether remembered by millions or by only a few, lived their lives and pursued their dreams with determination. Half of them were medical healers—five doctors and one nurse—who sacrificed their own safety for the health and well-being of their patients. The other half include a truck

driver, an orchid grower, a teacher, and a writer. Many were Cleaveland’s acquaintances. Although the book suffers from a few abrupt transitions, it generally reads well. Chapters containing frequent quotes from those profiled are especially effective. In the epilogue, Cleaveland thoughtfully discusses the nature of courage and reflects on the type of courage that each of his heroes displayed. In the book’s final section, Cleaveland describes—and persuasively recommends—the autobiographies of five other courageous individuals.

Claudia Clark

CLAUDIA CLARK prepared this book note while a Science Editor intern.