

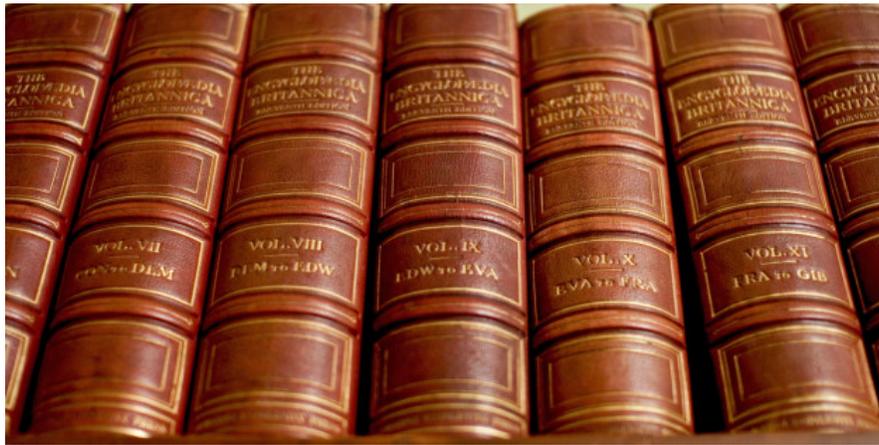


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## E-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-æ-d-i-a



By Marty Kaplan



STEWART/FICKR

I wonder how Jiminy Cricket would have handled the æ.

Half of the articles in the Encyclopædia Britannica are now available on its website for free. They used to be behind a \$70-a-year pay wall, but, as the *Chicago Tribune* recently reported, the “246-year-old privately held company is shifting its virtual encyclopedia toward a free, advertising-supported model.”

The edition of the Britannica that my cousin Harold’s wife sold my parents when I was in high school — “So you don’t want him to get into a good college?” clinched the deal — did not include entries about websites or pay walls, and “virtual” still meant something else. Talk about obsolescence: In 2012, when the Britannica stopped publishing a print edition and went entirely online, the only remaining excuse I had for hanging on to the 144 pounds of it that I’d hauled to my freshman dorm, and to every address since, was toast.

But the truth was that it was not the Britannica, but the World Book — which another cousin had also guilt-tripped my parents into buying when I was in the fifth grade — that had been my go-to homework resource for, um, paraphrasing until I left for college. The World Book was colorful and kid-friendly; the Britannica was grim and dense. I loved browsing randomly in the World Book, and some lavishly illustrated entries, like the painting article, still fire my synapses when I see something in a museum that I first encountered in its pages. The Britannica, on the other hand, was broccoli.

Thanks to the *Mickey Mouse Club*, I knew how to spell encyclopedia well before we owned one. That Disney show, which I started watching as soon as we had a TV set, featured an animated segment hosted by Jiminy Cricket that must be one of the earliest examples of mass entertainment used for educational purposes. (It also spawned an instructional film rental division for the company — Walt knew how to wring every penny from his market — but the profit motive didn’t compromise the content.) Today, on YouTube, you can watch Jiminy Cricket sing the opening song:

Curiosity, people say,  
 Killed a kitty cat one fine day.  
 Well, this may be true, but hear me -  
 Here is what to do for curiosity:  
 Get the en...cyclopedia,  
 E-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a!  
 En...cyclopedia,  
 E-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a!  
 If you want to know the answers, here is the way.

A generation learned to spell that word from that song. I'm sure it was the longest word I knew how to spell at the time, though it wasn't the longest word I knew. That would be the 28-letter antisestablishmentarianism, whose meaning I didn't quite get until I was in graduate school, and which the Merriam-Webster dictionary — owned now by the Britannica Company — doesn't even include today, because almost no one uses it any more.

To say that almost no one uses encyclopedias any more would be an exaggeration. According to the website Alexa, which tracks and ranks sites based on daily visitors and page views, U.S. traffic to britannica.com ranks it at 2,240 on the list of sites, beating the pants off worldbook.com, which comes in around 68,000. Both those brands are ghost towns compared to Wikipedia, which is ranked sixth.

Of course a Wikipedia entry is only as accurate as its contributors, which means that hoaxes, vandalism, hatchet jobs, public relations scams and political manipulation, not to mention mistakes and out-of-date information, are among the risks you run when you use it. Harvard officially tells its freshmen that "some information in Wikipedia may well be accurate," and that it's convenient "when the stakes are low (you need a piece of information to settle a bet with your roommate, or you want to get a basic sense of what something means before starting more in-depth research)," but it's "not a reliable source for academic research." The Britannica — whose graphic appeal has come a long way since I donated mine to the Friends of the Los Angeles Public Library — today still employs some 500 editors, contributors and other staff, which makes Wikipedia's paid editorial team of zero an actual ghost town.

But the choice isn't Wikipedia or the Britannica. If you vigilantly take into account the accuracy of the sources you use — and in an infotainment age that monetizes ignorance, that's a big if — then most of the information in the history of the world is available to anyone, anytime, for free on a device you can carry around in your pocket.

I have to keep reminding myself of that. It's a miracle that I can find a clip of Jiminy Cricket singing e-n-c-y-c-l-o-p-e-d-i-a on YouTube; that I can figure out how to type the æ that the Britannica has shrewdly kept in its brand (on a Mac keyboard, it's option + single-quote); that I can effortlessly learn online what an æ is (a digraph or ligature), and what it's called (an ash). It's a wonderment that I can enter the name of a website into Alexa and learn its ranking; find out what the *Harvard Guide to Using Sources* tells its Expository Writing students about Wikipedia; discover that the *LA Times* story I read about the Britannica is actually a reprint of a piece in the *Chicago Tribune*.

And it's amazing that paying 50 bucks on ebay will get me my Britannica back. Well, not exactly mine. Mine had my boutonniere from the junior prom pressed inside one of the volumes. I remembered that after the set had been long gone from the 10-cent table at the John C. Fremont Branch. Some things even Google can't retrieve.

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*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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