

## In praise of a manual labour of love

***Paul Fisher discovers how three old school churns took the inscrutability out of the computer guide and taught users of the Z88 laptop not to panic.***

Vic and Gill Gerhardi and Andy Berry have just written a book called Z88 Magic. It's slightly unusual for three people to share author's credits on a book, and still more usual when it turns out that they are old school friends, now in their mid to late thirties, who have remained so close that many questions are answered with one voice.

Otherwise ours was a normal "new product" interview and it was according to the conventions of the PR lunch that when they invited me to their local restaurant, I chose where I wanted to sit and ordered first. Odd, then that at the end of the meal the waiter handed me the bill. They paid it, but more of that later.

Z88 Magic (published by Kuma,

price £14.95) starts by announcing a commitment to the Cambridge Computers' micro which has reasserted Sir Clive Sinclair's presence, if not his trading name (which was sold to Alan Sugar's Amstrad in 1986), in the small computer marketplace.

"The main thing that physically sets the Z88 apart is its size," they write. "For those of you who haven't been introduced yet, it's small, the size of an A4 piece of paper and the thickness of a folder. Its limitations of size, however, do not inhibit its computing power or memory size. This book was written on it.

Their line, as cutlery was pushed back to give an introduction to Z88 Pipedream word-processing, was that I should prepare this

article on one. "Only £199," they said. "The screen concentrates the mind to write shorter sentences" I was told.

Andy Berry added the Z88's incy-wincy representation of the pages covered lets you know where you art Vic Gerhardi who trained as an engineer convinced me that it would be simplicity itself (plus £30 PC-Link) to push copy from a Z88 into my Amstrad PC. Out came a price list which explained (a) that they also speak with a dealer's enthusiasms and (b) why Gill Gerhardi had reminded me I mustn't be so unorthodox as to call their magical micro a "Sinclair."

The book was written after their consultancy business, Rakewell Ltd, had established Z88 training

days, which now cost £79.35 a head. In February, Kuma gave them a contract to put their training expertise on paper and the three assumed that their course notes could be spooned easily into a book.

Not so, and the excellent indexing which swiftly added flesh to Vic Gerhardi's advice about PC Links, is enough to confirm that the book isn't rehashed course blurb.

By May nothing much had been done and Gill Gerhardi, whose two sons and amateur dramatics work means she is semidetached from the consultancy was roped in to write the easy bits. The "easy bits" (their phrase) stretch a third of the way through to cover the word-processing. "I understand more than people

starting out" she says but I can still talk and think in everyday language."

Sections on the Z88's spreadsheet, clock. Diary, storage and transfer techniques were drafted by her husband. Berry, who came to this venture with a first in mathematics for business from Middlesex Poly and an MSc in computer science from Manchester University, did the introduction to Basic.

After that division of labour, they went into committee to hammer the text into shape. Berry won a battle of the exclamation marks, though these have been replaced with capital letters at the **IMPORTANT BITS!**

Magic emerged as a theme, "because the operating system is called OZ", which has made for an easily remembered title and a metaphor where the bundled-up application programs are recast as

the cauldron" and so on. It keeps the book accessible but not twee.

The text is interspersed with tips (again well indexed) dealing with those uncommon quirks which are common to any computer. Try this for a taste of their useful non-manual speak on a saving routine. "Prepare yourself for a horrible shock," they say.

Whenever we use the Save to EPROM command it still makes us jump. It flashes the screen in a most alarming way to conserve battery power. Although we are warning you now in writing, its not quite the same as the real thing so **DON'T PANIC**, everything is all right.. Just wait or, better still, don't look at the screen.

By August the text was completed and transferred from their Z88s to a PC-compatible because Kuma needed it on DOS-format disc. Normal publishing conventions

demand that authors wait at least six months between delivery of manuscript and publication. Kuma breaks these conventions by whacking authors' disks straight into a typesetter. It had Z88 Magic out well in time for Christmas.

In September proofs went to Sir Clive who obliged with the judgment that it is "A great introduction for a Z88 user." And a great plug to have on the cover.

Tim Moore who runs Kuma is equally complimentary, saying: "A masterpiece of clarity, perception and understanding." Still, that's what the publisher would say. What I say is that this book is funny, sharp and excellently written. It is one of those unusual computer guides that doesn't leap blindly into screeds of inscrutability after a painful condescending page or two about how to machine on. Having read the book, I'm all but

convinced that I need to buy the micro and if some of this praise doesn't get my name on to the back of the second edition, I don't know what will.

It is unusual for me to talk about the structure of an article with interviewees, but I asked them what I should write about the cerebral palsy they all have. It has two of them slurring their speech and all three of them limping enough to convince a waiter that they are too disabled to pay a restaurant bill. "If we weren't disabled we wouldn't have gone to the same school and none of this would have happened." is their rehearsed line.

That still left me with how they thought I could best avoid writing a "wonderful cripples" article. They said "Bung it in at the end if you must."

- Rakewell Ltd: 0908 366009: Kuma: 07357 4335  
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