XPath and XPointer
by John E. Simpson
O'Reilly, August 2002
ISBN 0-596-00291-2
196pp. $24.95 US, $38.95 CA, £17.50 UK

The greater part of this book deals with XPath 1.0, a mature member of the XML family, about which John E. Simpson writes in the clear style familiar to readers of his Q & A column at xml.com. In an original dissection of the subject matter, he provides the knowledge essential for a sound grasp of XPath, with good examples and analogies. He produces plenty of useful reference tables, and his sidebar diversions contain hard-won nuggets of expertise. His demonstrations of XPath at work are enhanced by screenshots from Dimitre Novatchev's serviceable XPath Visualiser.

Although the author places XPath in its historical and technological context, one criticism of this first part of the book is that it rather isolates XPath artificially from its natural environment. Part of his intended audience is the XML developer, but I can think of few others who would come to XPath other than via XSLT. The result is many references to XSLT, without much opportunity to expand further. (A useful reference on XSLT and EXSLT functions is included in the appendix.)

The rest of the book is taken up with surveys of XPath 2.0 and XPointer. It is unfortunate that since publication in August 2002, three of the four XPointer specifications have become W3C Recommendations and XPath 2.0 has undergone a further three iterations at Working Draft status. Potential readers of this book would therefore do well to heed the last of John E. Simpson's 'Top Ten Tips to Using XPath and XPointer' (http://www.xml.com/pub/a/2002/08/14/xpath_tips.html): "Keep an eye out for spec changes." Of course, this does not entirely invalidate the author's commentaries, and his discussion of these technologies is circumspect regarding their future development. Now that drafts are becoming finalised and implementations more frequent, however, the onus is on the reader to find out the latest news. That said, the discussion of XPath 2.0 requirements, and to a certain extent the XPointer drafts, shows the author's keen awareness of the ambiguities and compromises present in both documents, and may well inform a reading of their final versions.

Another slight criticism is that, for such an in-depth study of a narrow subject, there was little or no discussion of the tools and APIs available. This is more understandable in the case of XPath 2.0 and XPointer, but XPath 1.0 processors (such as Jaxen) have been around for some time now.

To conclude, it would seem difficult to produce an enduring technical work about anything so changeable as an XML 'standard'. The first part of this book is as good as any description of XPath 1.0 I have read. As a reference work, however, the currency aspect of the second part lets down *XPath and XPointer*.

Andrew Sales