

“SQL Tricks & Techniques for iSeries 400” Where’s the Beef?

Book Review by Thibault Dambrine

Like many former AS/400 – now iSeries – programmers, my background is well rooted in the RPG language. Recently, I took a new job where SQL/400 is the language of choice. Coming from a traditional RPG and CL background, using SQL for most tasks on the iSeries is great although it does take some getting used to.

Using SQL on large databases, one learns quickly that SQL is not only about syntax but also about performance. Often the same results can be achieved with more than one technique. Working with SQL, one quickly learns that it is surprisingly easy to produce code that works for a small sample but does not scale well with larger amounts of data. In many ways, SQL is a tool where one learns a lot from experience.

Like any other specialized field, the iSeries market has its recognized experts, its centers of knowledge, and its books that some like to refer to as “bibles”. I have heard **Skip Marchesani** at COMMON conference once and was very impressed with his presentation and knowledge of the iSeries database. On the strength of his name, I purchased *SQL Tricks & Techniques for iSeries 400* from iSeries 400 Experts through the Web. The web page stated “Tackle your toughest challenges with...” next to a picture of the book cover with the CD in front of it.

The price was steep at \$199.00 US, but can you put a price on time? If there were anything I could learn to write better performing code, it would all be worthwhile.

Here are my impressions:

At a Glance

SQL Tricks & Techniques for iSeries 400 contains only 171 pages, not including the “About the Experts” bio page, a few ads at the back of the book, and the CD that comes with it. At the spine, the book is about 1 cm thick and it has the feel of something that one could put together at a photocopy shop. I understand that this comment may sound irrelevant. Let me remind you of the price I paid here – \$199.00 US. When was the last time you spent that much cash from your own pocket on a book? Let’s just say I had high expectations – all the way down to the presentation. If the content was more impressive, I would not have mentioned this detail.

Figure 1. Topics sorted by Author:

Create and manage database objects with SQL, Part I	By Skip Marchesani
Create and manage database objects using SQL, Part II	By Skip Marchesani
How to change physical files on the fly	By Skip Marchesani
Identify duplicate rows with SQL inner join	By Skip Marchesani
Learn how to Count with SQL	By Skip Marchesani
Learning SQL: AS/400 database management tool of the future, Part I	By Skip Marchesani
Learning SQL: AS/400 database management tool of the future, Part II	By Skip Marchesani
Learning SQL: AS/400 database management tool of the future, Part III	By Skip Marchesani
Learning SQL: AS/400 database management tool of the future, Part IV	By Skip Marchesani
Leverage the power of the SQL-based tool Query Manager to ease end user apps	By Skip Marchesani
New V5R1 enhancements trigger DB2 functionality	By Skip Marchesani
Query Manager: SQL powered queries	By Skip Marchesani
Save time with SQL Subquery and subselect, Part I	By Skip Marchesani
Save time with SQL Subquery and Subselect, Part II	By Skip Marchesani
Save time with SQL tricks and techniques: Use characters to edit a numeric field	By Skip Marchesani
Search by sound: The SOUNDEX function	By Skip Marchesani
A home-grown SQL BindRow function makes the SQL CLI APIs easy to use	By Ron Turull
Embedded SQL programming without SQL/400 – A working example	By Ron Turull
Getting data off your iSeries	By Ron Turull
Hidden treasure – SQL Call Level Interface APIs lets you do embedded SQL	By Ron Turull
Jazzing up SQL-generated tables in Net.Data	By Ron Turull
SQL enhancement set for DB2 with V5R2	By Rizal Ahmed
Java Database connectivity delivers AS/400 data for e-business	By Jim Mason
Simplify iSeries access with user-defined functions	By Howard F. Arner
Reuse code and boost performance with Stored Procedures	By Howard F. Arner



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iSeries 400 Experts

The book lists five authors: **Skip Marchesani, Howard F. Arner, Jr., Jim Mason, Craig Pelkie and Ron Turull**. All five have impressive biographies and I can personally vouch for Mr. Marchesani's skills as a valuable and informative content speaker.

It comes with a CD, which contains a copy of the book, including the source code. You can install the contents of the

CD on a network directory and share the information quite conveniently. I would encourage all publishers of technical material to include such a content/code CD with their books.

The Material

As one who is already coding with SQL, one of the first things I looked for in this manual was an index, in order to see what topics were available. As it is, the book has a table of contents with descriptive titles (Figure 1) but no index. Although they did provide a CD which can be searched with Windows Explorer, the index is a big omission.

Rather than attempting to be a conventional manual, this book is really an anthology, a collection of articles, each exploring a different aspect of SQL and DB2 on iSeries. As such, they each have limited scope and depth. There are 26 articles, 16 of them written by Skip Marchesani. There is no reference to where or when these articles may have been published before. The topics explored in each chapter are all interesting on their own. (See **Figure 1**, for a list sorted by author.)

"Getting data off your iSeries", the choice for the first article in this "in-depth" SQL book is interesting. It discusses the use of FTP and Client Access – nothing to do with SQL! One wonders what this article is doing there, and as a first chapter to boot.

The next four chapters are about learning SQL: "AS/400 database management tool of the future", Part I to IV. Part I has a representative subtitle: "What is SQL and why should I use it?" My understanding of "in-depth" and "Tricks and Techniques" implies some measure of advanced topics – hardly the place for wondering what SQL is all about.


Some of the other articles are a bit more interesting. The API, trigger and soundex are examples. There are also some real-life examples, such as the one identifying duplicate rows in a mailing list with SQL inner join, and editing numeric fields with characters by using casting functions.

When purchasing this book, I was interested in several aspects of SQL. They were: performance, cursors, and stored procedures. On these topics, I did find information in a number of chapters but nothing very organized or coordinated. In the absence of an index, to find where a topic may be explored, I needed to load the CD and use Explorer to scan the material for what I was searching.

In Conclusion

I am all for paying for value, and was willing to bet that *SQL Tricks & Techniques for iSeries 400* would deliver. There is nothing wrong with any of the articles within the book. They are all very good. They remain however, a collection of articles. Not all of them are expert level or in-depth material or in one case even related to SQL. As such, the "in-depth" billing on the front of the book and the "Tackle your toughest challenges with..." on the seller's web page (<http://www.iseries400experts.com/ts4/8.jsp>) are, in my opinion, misleading.

Since this book did not do a great job as an advanced topic manual, one may ask "would it be a good introductory SQL book?" My answer is: "No." There are many other manuals that are cheaper, provide more content and are more effectively organized than this one. As a point of comparison, the *SQL/400 Developer's Guide* by **Paul Conte** and **Mike Cravitz** for \$75.00 US is much more comprehensive and well organized.

After buying *SQL Tricks & Techniques for iSeries 400* I felt short-changed. All things considered, I would say that this book would be good and fair value at around \$29.00. Until the asking price comes back to Earth, I would advise against purchasing this book. 

Thibault Dambrine is an IT consultant. You can find his website and other articles at www.tylogix.com.



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