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There are times when a dictionary definition simply does not suffice, but one hasn't the time, inclination, or industry to work one's way through an extensive encyclopedia entry. Enter the desk reference. Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia is no larger than your average collegiate dictionary, yet it packs enough punch to make one feel, if not fluent in a subject, then certainly conversant. Gone are the days of dry, just-the-facts-ma'am desk encyclopedias. This one, created in cooperation with Encyclopaedia Britannica and with the assistance of 25 academic consultants, has personality. The entry for Fassbinder, for example, goes beyond merely listing his nationality, dates, and films. "Defiantly homosexual and provocative," it tells us, "he led an outrageous life and died from a drug overdose at 36." The nighthawk is so exceptionally described that one can almost hear its "sharp nasal call" and the whirring sound it makes when it dives during courtship. The 25,000 entries are illustrated by more than 1,650 photographs, drawings, maps, and diagrams. And, at nearly 1,800 pages, this volume is surprisingly not unwieldy; a spectacular addition to anyone's reference arsenal.