In this issue, CJR does something that many newspapers won’t—celebrate books. As Steve Wasserman, the former books editor of the Los Angeles Times, points out, more and more newspapers are ridding themselves of their book review sections and even their book reviewers. Wasserman knows what he is talking about. Despite editing one of the country’s most respected book review sections, in 2005 he found himself out of a job due to cutbacks.

Two other articles discuss the connection between daily journalism and books. Veteran editor Elisabeth Sifton explores the importance and popularity of news books, while former Washington Post education reporter Linda Perlstein talks about the advantages a book author has over a daily newspaper reporter when trying to cover a story in depth.

Are newspapers hurting themselves by cutting back on their books coverage? Is encouraging readers to buy and think about books good for newspapers? How important do you think books coverage is for a newspaper and its readers?

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Could TPM be a model for future cooperation between newspapers? Does it represent the future of journalism? Why or why not? An editor is quoted in the story as saying that there is an “enormous cultural disconnect” between journalists and bloggers. Why do you think that is so? What can bloggers do that journalists can’t and vice versa? How can the gap be narrowed? Should it be? ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Find more blogs or Web sites that do journalism. As a class, catalogue the best of them and distribute the list amongst yourselves. According to the story, Chris Cillizza’s The Fix offers a look at what The Washington Post may look like one day. Check out The Fix (http://blog.washingtonpost.com/thefix). How does it differ from TPM? Compare and contrast its strengths and weaknesses to those of TPM. Do you see it as the Post’s future? The article also mentions I. F. Stone’s Weekly. Who was he? What motivated him? What was his strengths as a reporter? Why was his weekly so influential? What can a young reporter learn from Stone and his work?

GOODBYE TO ALL THAT, PP. 42-53:

Do research to find out why the newspapers mentioned in the story eliminated their books coverage. Do you think their reasons were justified? If the sports section of the Los Angeles Times was — like its book review sections — ad-free, why weren’t the sports editors pressured into changing their coverage? Why does the author believe that books coverage is important to a newspaper and its readers? Do you agree or disagree? Why? What issues does the controversy raise about a newspaper’s obligations toward its readers? According to Wasserman, many of the book reviews that appear in newspapers are mediocre. What do you think are the elements that go into a quality review? Find an example of what you think is a well-written book review and share it with the class along with your reasons for choosing it. Do you agree with the statement on the bottom of page 47 that criticism is not necessarily a democratic activity? Why or why not? Read the statistics about America’s reading habits on page 52. Are they troubling? Why or why not? How can Americans be convinced to do more reading? ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Imagine you are the arts editor of a mid-sized newspaper. You have asked your publisher to either retain or create a books section. You are granted permission on the grounds that you create a section that attracts and interests readers. Come up with a mock-up of your section, complete with sample interviews and prototypes for the types of articles that you would like to feature in your section. In an accompanying memorandum, explain how you envision your books section, the kinds of books you would review, and the coverage you would offer. Be sure to explain the decisions you’ve made.

UNSHACKLED, PP. 57-60:

According to Linda Perlstein, sources are much more likely to talk to a book author than a newspaper reporter. If you were a reporter covering a beat, how would you go about trying to allay the concerns of your sources? The author lists several advantages that a book author has over a daily newspaper reporter. Suggest an equal number of advantages that a newspaper reporter has over a book author. In the end, who do you think ultimately has the upper hand? ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES: Outline a proposal for a book based on a local news story. Explain why your idea is important, why it deserves book-length treatment, and how you would take it beyond a single newspaper story or series.