

The National Book Critics Circle Campaign to Save Book Reviewing, 2007

The National Book Critics Circle 2007 "Campaign to Save Book Reviewing," launched April 23, 2007 as an initiative at the NBCC March 2007 board meeting, included more than 100 original blog posts from authors, critics, librarians, booksellers, passionate readers.

The posts on Critical Mass over the first five weeks of the campaign offer a snapshot of American literary culture circa spring 2007, which was evolving faster than many readers, authors and book critics could absorb. Solicited from authors, editors, journalists, book critics and others involved with books and literature, the posts offered a diverse and wide-ranging set of viewpoints--as might be expected from a group of critics and passionate writers and readers. Among them: Richard Powers, George Saunders, Rick Moody, Lee Smith, Andrei Codrescu, Roxana Robinson, AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) president Catherine Brady, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Ford, Nadine Gordimer, Sara Paretsky, Stewart O'Nan, Nicholas Christopher, Bill Roorbach; book editors from the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the American Book Review, the San Francisco Chronicle, the New Orleans Times Picayune, the Jewish Forward, as well as Bob Mong, editor of the Dallas Morning News, Mark Sarvas, who writes the literary blog *The Elegant Variation*, and Carrie Kania, who described an inclusive approach to getting the word out about books she publishes: print, radio, television, online, including MySpace pages, literary blogs, bookstore websites. (Read the blog and the comments for the flavor of the sometimes heated discourse.)

The campaign also included a series of related op ed pieces, editorials, interviews, literary blog posts, reports and reactions. To name a few: Salman Rushdie on the Colbert Report, Scott McLemee in *insidehighered.com*, Art Wallace in *Huffington Post*, Bookbabe Ellen Heltzel on *Poynter.com*, Michael Connelly in the Los Angeles Times, David Kipen in *Salon*, then NBCC president John Freeman, in *The Guardian* and in interviews on the BBC, NPR, Wisconsin Public Radio, and the Leonard Lopate show. Motoko Rich in *The New York Times*, "Are Book Reviewers Out of Print?" and *The Los Angeles Times*'s Josh Getlin, "A war of words breaks out between print and Internet writers as newspapers cut back coverage" focused on an assumed conflict between print reviewers and literary bloggers.

"These generalizations are especially damaging because it gets in the way of an

important truth --we're all pitching in to the same conversation," Freeman wrote in one blog post. "Whether it's on screen or in print, on a podcast or through the tabloid your subway seatmate has open on her lap next to you, this swirl of debate and opinion, cant and artful critique is all part of the same froth about books. It's how our culture thinks about itself, displays and digests its wisdom, gives a platform to intelligent (we hope) voices, and sifts signal from noise. Which is why the NBCC is prepared to fight for it -- smart, informed, well-crafted criticism is essential to our culture, to our democracy and to the improvement of our arts...[W]e wouldn't be staging this campaign from a blog, across the web, linking to bloggers and asking other bloggers to contribute posts if we didn't believe in the medium's capacity to bring intelligent debate to books. Nor do we believe that print reviews have a monopoly on good writing or contextualizing...But right now the fight that needs fighting is not for blogs (which are doing just fine), but print pages..."

During the first five weeks of the campaign, the sea change in newspaper book reviews continued:

*The Los Angeles Times combined its book section with the "Ideas" section; the book review's editors launched a blog and expanded online book coverage to include four monthly columns. *The Chicago Tribune shifted its Sunday book review section to Saturday, with a smaller circulation (the book review is available online in a handsome pdf format). *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution eliminated its book editor's position. The NBCC organized an online petition (nearly 6000 names, including Norman Mailer, James Lee Burke, Melissa Fay Greene, Chimamanda Adichie) and a Read-In at the offices of the AJC attended by Atlanta booksellers, novelists, professors, readers. The May 3 Read-in was covered in Publishers Weekly, Creative Loafing, Baby Got Books, CNN.com (Todd Leopold's "Who reads books anymore?" drew dozens of comments), The Wordsmiths blog, and Atlanta-based television. *The Raleigh News-Observer eliminated its book editor's job and shifted the editor, former NBCC board member Peder Zane, to Ideas columnist (he wrote his farewell column on May 2; novelist Lee Smith responded on Critical Mass later that week).

*The New York Times Syndicate, taking advantage of the cutbacks in book pages around the country, offered a package of book reviews to make up for the lost content. The Washington Post followed suit. *The Minneapolis Star Tribune cut staff to the bone (but not the book review editor).

*The Columbus Dispatch book editor launched a book-related blog.

In part as a result of the Campaign, the NBCC was honored by the Association of American Publishers (see press release below). John Freeman was NBCC president during the NBCC's 2007 Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. The NBCC blogging committee at the time: Eric Banks, Jane Ciabattari, Rigoberto Gonzalez, Mary Ann Gwinn, James Marcus, Maureen McLane, Scott McLemee, David Orr, Jennifer Reese, Rebecca Skloot (webmaster), Lizzie Skurnick, Eric Miles Williamson and Art Winslow.

Jane Ciabattari, NBCC President 2008-2011

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Publishers to Honor National Book Critics Circle

Washington, DC, December 5, 2007: The U.S. publishing industry will pay formal tribute to the National Book Critics Circle for its unique role in the nation's literary life, according to an announcement today by the Association of American Publishers (AAP). The NBCC has been named to receive the 2008 AAP Honors, an award given annually to individuals and institutions outside the publishing industry for significant achievements in promoting American books and authors. The AAP Honors will be presented to NBCC President John Freeman during the Association's Annual Meeting in New York on March 5, 2008.

Founded in 1974, the NBCC comprises nearly 800 active book reviewers joined in common cause to promote quality writing and enrich the nation's literary dialogue. In addition to its prestigious annual book awards program, each year the organization honors outstanding work done by an NBCC member with the Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. Members of the NBCC Board of Directors speak out on the country's premier literary blog, Critical Mass. As newspapers across the country slashed book review space and fired experienced book editors in the name of belt-tightening, the NBCC decided to fight back and earlier this year launched the Campaign to Save Book Reviews, featuring blog posts by concerned writers, interviews with book editors "in the trenches," Q&A with newspaper editors and owners, a boots-on-the-ground protest in Atlanta, and more than a dozen panel discussions around the country to raise awareness of the issue. Since then the NBCC has fought to foster a national literary culture, creating a Best Recommended List, made up of the votes of its members and former book prize finalists and winners, and kicked off several new essay series on Critical Mass.

In announcing the award, AAP President and CEO Pat Schroeder said: "Since its founding more than three decades ago, the NBCC has played a central role in this country's literary dialogue, but never has its voice been stronger or more urgently needed. We're delighted to honor the NBCC for its passionate commitment to our favorite cause—spreading the word about great books."

The AAP Honors were inaugurated in 1997 to acknowledge the contributions of individuals and organizations outside the book industry who have helped focus public attention on American books and their importance in our society. Previous winners have included C-SPAN's Brian Lamb, National Public Radio, country music legend Dolly Parton who created the "Imagination Library" literacy program, The Today Show, Oprah Winfrey, Latino television journalist Jorge Ramos, and USA Today.

The Association of American Publishers is the principal trade association of the U.S. book publishing industry with some 300 members comprising most of the major commercial book publishers in the United States, as well as small and medium-sized houses, non-profit publishers, university presses and scholarly societies. The promotion of reading and literacy is among AAP's highest priorities.

April, 2007

Dear NBCC Board Members,

We discussed this at the March board meeting. Now I'd like to enlist your support (as book critics, book editors, NBCC board members, and in some cases authors) in the crusade the NBCC is launching April 23, in an effort to support book reviews, book editors, book pages, book culture.

Our crusade, in a nutshell:

During the last week in April and throughout May and thereafter through the year the NBCC is asking authors and editors and journalists and book critics to editorialize on the value of books and urging them to encourage newspapers/other publications to retain /expand book pages, save book editors, book criticism and book critics. The NBCC is sponsoring a June 1 panel on book reviewing at the BEA, with results of our survey of members on current book reviewing ethics. The subject of preserving book pages will certainly come up.

This month the Los Angeles Times is combining its book section with the "Ideas" section, the Raleigh News-Observer just shifted the book editor into Ideas columnist and is not replacing him, and elsewhere, including Dallas, the pages devoted to books are shrinking, the book editors are being replaced or transplanted. What if there were only one or two or three book sections left in the country?

The good news is, when the SF Chronicle killed its book pages, the San Francisco literary community was up in arms and saved it; we hope Oscar will write a blog post about this. Similarly, when the Chicago Tribune was going to cut back, Scott Turow and other authors came forward to talk about the value of the book pages and book editors and book reviews and book critics. Elizabeth Taylor will post on the continuing innovations at her paper, as will Geeta. A number of authors are doing posts for the blog; there also are plans for op eds and opinion pieces and blog posts in various publications throughout the country.

Anyway, that is the feel of it. We're trying to coordinate a group of editorials/columns/blogposts/etc nationwide beginning late April and running through the rest of the year.

The NBCC blog, Critical Mass, will be the central gathering point for all the commentary and dialogue, with blog posts and links to pieces; we also are developing a webpage on the NBCC website, "Save Book Reviews," in which we will post links to all the pieces, and names/addresses of publishers in at-risk cities. This will be linked via button to the AWP website (and can be linked to others, as well. Any ideas?) We also will include the Q and As with book critics and book editors from the archives.

Would you be able to assign something? Or write something in your pages or for your usual publications? Or write something we could post on the NBCC blog, Critical Mass? Or ask writers/critics you know to be in touch to post on the blog?

Issues to address: the value of a variety of voices among the reviewers, the difference in the critical attention a book received ten or twenty years ago. What alternatives are arising, for better or worse? Do you have suggestions for alternatives to book review sections. Or alternatives ways of financially supporting newspaper book review sections?

Hope you can take a minute to join in.

Cheers,

Jane

NBCC Vice President/Membership
<http://www.janeciabattari.com/>

CRITICAL MASS

the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

You will be forwarded to our new blog in 10 seconds. To go now, click here:
www.bookcritics.org/blog

4/23/2007

NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews

WHAT IS THIS SITE?

Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the NBCC Board of Directors (see list of bloggers below).

WHAT IS THE NBCC?

The non-profit organization of book critics responsible for the yearly National Book Critics Circle Awards.

To make a tax-deductible donation to the National Book Critics Circle, please click the donation button below.

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THE NBCC BLOGGING COMMITTEE

Eric Banks

Jane Ciabattari

Rigoberto Gonzalez

Mary Ann Gwinn

James Marcus

Maureen McLane



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I had an editor at a newspaper who liked to go over copy by the phone. His edits could be brutal, but he always circled around with a palliative comment to remind me it was all in service of a bigger need. “Remember, John,” he would say, “this is for the guy out in the suburbs eating his corn flakes. He has about five minutes before it’s outside for some Sunday yard work. So you want to tell him something important.”

Over the past five years, one by one, newspapers have begun to forsake that reader. While book sections at the Washington Post and the New York Times continue strongly, many other newspapers have begun packing up and winnowing down their book coverage. And it started at the top. Not long ago, the San Francisco Chronicle Book Review, which has readership levels in excess of fifty percent, was folded into another part of the paper. The community protested, it was restored, but just recently the section was cut in half in order to make space for an advertisement.

Elsewhere at the Los Angeles Times, the Chicago Tribune, Newsday, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the Memphis Commercial Appeal, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Dallas Morning News, the Sun Sentinel, the New Mexican, the Village Voice, [the Atlanta Journal Constitution](#) and dozens upon dozens of other papers book coverage has been cut back or slashed all together, moved, winnowed, filled with more wire copy, or generally been treated as expendable.

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

[Art Winslow](#)

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LOGISTICS

The postings on this site represent the views and opinions of each individual poster and are not representative of views held by the National Book Critics Circle as an organization, or the NBCC board as a whole. Everything on this blog is copyright protected, including the image of the fox.

COMMENTS

All reader comments on this site are moderated: We welcome all civil commentary. Any comments that are inflammatory, mean spirited, spam or otherwise inappropriate will not be posted. We also discourage anonymous commenting.

FOR MORE INFO

*The organization: [Visit our website](#)
The blog: [Email Critical Mass](#)*

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[Hal Crowther Remembers Molly Ivins](#)

And we're getting tired of it. We're tired of watching individual voices from local communities passed over for wire copy. We're tired of book editors with decades of experience shown the exit so that the book section can be passed like a hot potato with no dressing. We're tired of shrinking reviews. We're tired of hearing newspapers fret and worry over the future of print while they dismantle the section of the paper which deals most closely with the two things which have kept them alive since the dawn of printing presses: the public's hunger for knowledge and the written word.

So this week the board of the National Book Critics Circle is launching a campaign to try and beat back these changes. Over the next six weeks, this blog will feature posts by concerned writers, interviews with book editors in the trenches, links to op-eds by critics, novelists and other NBCC board members, Q&As with newspaper editors and owners who will explain the business context for these changes, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

So stay tuned. For the past three decades, the National Book Critics Circle has believed that the best argument for the importance of book reviews was well-chosen literature itself. So we have put our energy into a prize honoring the best books of the year, and singling out critics who have consistently helped us find them. But it turns out that's not enough – that the professional arguer has to argue for his own existence now as well. We hope you join us in that fight, because it is a fight that benefits us all – readers, publishers, critics, booksellers, not to mention the guy eating his cornflakes on Sunday.

John Freeman
President
National Book Critics Circle

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 6:40:00 AM



4 COMMENTS:

Russ said...

this is a phenomenal idea acting as an agent of change-the louder and bigger the voices, the better.

as someone in a town affected by the book section cutbacks, not just as someone who makes their living in the book industry, but as a book lover, a total book geek-thank you for all the work you're doing.

8:40 AM

*In Spain, the Sun Shines Everyday,
and all the Lit...*

*Video of the 2006 NBCC Events
Now Online*

*A Conversation with Beverly
Jarrett, University of...*

*Atlanta Journal Constitution
Eliminates Book Edito...*

*Around the World at the London
Book Fair*

The Orange Shortlist

*The LBF -- a glimpse at the future
Tuesday April 17 Roundup*

Past Posts Of Note

*Reviewing 101: John Updike's
Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
routine, and feeling glum about
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful
Book Reviewing*

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30
Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for
Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a
Novel and who's trying to ban
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive*

 crissa said...

Bravo!!! And thank you for putting this issue in the spotlight.

11:06 AM

 phillip said...

The VAST majority of people on this earth don't care about book critics. And most writers and readers could do without them too. It's no tragedy that these jobs are being eliminated. It's progress. Get over it. You picked a useless profession. How's that for constructive criticism? And no, I'm not a disgruntled writer. I'm just here to give to a dose of reality.

11:46 AM

 Coll B. Lue said...

My comment in response to the article on the CityPaper post:

Coll B. Lue Says:
Apr. 30, 2007, at 2:35 pm

I've read a few weblog posts on bookcriticscircle which reflect writers who appear 'hungry' to get their points across; the website on the whole provides for interesting reviews.

Book Reviewing is a precious tool which not only provides book critics with a valuable means of letting readers make informed choices of listing good reading materials, in their busy schedule of things but it provides readers with a brief but well informed view of new publications, which, if made redundant, could detract from a newspaper's literary content.

According to Washington CityPaper, cutting back the review section can only mean one thing: Negativitism.

I don't have anything brilliant to add to the conversation, except to argue that by gutting review sections, daily newspapers undermine their mission twice over: cutting back doesn't just hurt arts coverage, it lessens the papers' ability to catch up on reportage that found its way into book form because their news budgets got slashed. And I hope that "marketing heads of book publishers" gets added to the mix of people the NBCC taps for comment.

(Quote in The Washington CityPaper)

Making changes so as to save money is just ironic - the short term consequences are rewarding but the long term ones might just be a setback in the readership statistics.

Bookcriticscircle have been quoted as saying,

NBCC president John Freeman promises to use the group's blog, Critical Mass, to "feature posts by concerned writers, interviews with book editors in the trenches, links to op-eds by critics,

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly

novelists and other NBCC board members, Q&As with newspaper editors and owners.”

This cutback on a crucial aspect of literary publications is a setback not quite set in ink but still a harsh reality.

5:22 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

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[On the Newspaper Review Controversy](#)

[August Kleinzahler tries to deal with the “pre...](#)

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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4/23/2007

David L. Ulin on the new Los Angeles Times Book Review



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of a blog series featuring posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q&As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

ONE OF THE MOST recent newspapers

affected by cutbacks was the Los Angeles Times, which for thirty years has published a stand alone Book Review. During that time, through the quality of its writing and the depth of its coverage, the Book Review emerged as a left-coast counterpoint to the New York Times Book Review and Washington Post Book World.

Last week, though, as the city geared up for the popular Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, the paper's Book Review was folded into an opinion section and given a few new online columns. We caught up with David L. Ulin, editor of the Los Angeles to talk about these changes and how they are going down.

Q: A lot of the news articles about the changes in your section used the word shrink. Has the book review actually shrunk? Will the amount of space devoted to reviews change? Will each review tend toward more words or fewer?

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All reader comments on this site are moderated: We welcome all civil commentary. Any comments that are inflammatory, mean spirited, spam or otherwise inappropriate will not be posted. We also discourage anonymous commenting.

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A: The Sunday Book Review has shrunk, although by less than was originally reported. As a stand-alone section, we were a 12 page tabloid. At the moment, we are sharing a 20 page tabloid with the Opinion section. To help mitigate these changes, we've redesigned our pages, moving events listings onto our web site and shrinking down the bestseller list, and we're running longer reviews in the daily paper, including some pieces that might have previously run on Sunday. In addition, we've initiated a series of web-only columns, and plan to do more with web-only material as things progress. The goal is that eventually, we will make up for any lost print space and, ideally, even expand our coverage by what we do on the web. As far as review lengths, we are running some shorter reviews now, although we continue to run longer reviews as we always have. This change, though, was in the works anyway -- I've long felt that it's good to have reviews of different lengths mixed throughout the section, for rhythm and pace.

Q: If the future of book sections is, as many people think it will be, some combination of print and online sections, which use multi-media technology like pod-casting and video steaming, etc., and good old fashioned textual analysis on dead trees, how do you ensure that they relate to one another? These realms can seem worlds apart sometimes.

A: They can seem worlds apart, but there are a couple of things that connect them, I think, beginning with sensibility. In the first place, it's essential to remember that, online or in print, we are a newspaper book review section. That's a very distinct sort of entity, different from a literary magazine or an online publication, or even a review journal like the New York Review of Books. Newspaper book sections are intended to bring the critical/literary conversation to the widest variety of readers. We mean to challenge our readers, but also, in an important sense, to be available to them -- accessible and intelligent at once. We also have the responsibility to function as a newspaper in terms of issues such as conflict of interest and fairness, whether we're publishing on the page or on the web. Because of this, we can't help but move more slowly than a lot of web sites; when we publish web-only content, it is edited, copy edited, vetted and checked just like a piece written for print. We (our writers and editors) are individuals, but we are also speaking from within a larger institution, and all the paper's ethical and structural guidelines apply. As far as the real nature of what will happen, we're still at the earliest stages of seeing how this works. But essentially, we are interested in trying to use the print edition to lead readers to the web and vice versa, as well as offering enhancements online. Starting shortly after the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books, we will be offering podcasts and videos of Festival programming, and we will initiate live online author chats from the Festival itself. In the end, I think, what will connect our print and online components is a commitment to literature, to the discussion about books and reading,

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Past Posts Of Note

[Reviewing 101: John Updike's Rules, which he admits breaking.](#)

[Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future](#)

[The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing](#)

[George Orwell on Book Reviews](#)

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[On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books](#)

[The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey](#)

[Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey](#)

[To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)

as filtered through what is hopefully an integrated identity.

Q: Are these new changes aimed at reaching a new or shrinking audience? And if so, who are they?

A: The initial impetus for these changes was economic; it was decided that the paper needed to cut pages, and among the cuts were pages in Book Review. That's a business issue, not an editorial one. Once the decision was made, however, we began to think about how to make it work on the editorial level, about how to keep book coverage cohesive and engaged. The web offers us space, the opportunity to develop multimedia enhancements, and the chance to connect with our audience (or a new audience) in a different way. We had been thinking in these terms anyway, but this brought an added urgency to the equation. Now, we're learning how to make it work. I don't know if it's so much a matter of trying to reach any particular audience as it is of trying to reach as many people as we can. We cover an industry that's not in our distribution area, an industry that's actively written about on the web -- perhaps because it's text-based, as so much of the internet still is. Look at this interview: You e-mailed me questions and I'm typing up answers to send back for you to post. So the web seemed a natural place for us to look towards, issues of new or shrinking audience aside.

Q: Do you ever worry by putting some of the features of a book review online you are cutting some readers -- without access to computers or the internet, say -- out of the more democratic reach of a newspaper?

A: Yes, I worry about this a lot, and I've heard from readers who are concerned about it, as well. There's a tendency in certain quarters to think that everyone is online, that the web is the future and that there's no one who sees print as a front line source of information anymore. Not only is this wrong, it's arrogant, elitist -- which is exactly what newspapers aren't supposed to be. I know we're cutting some readers out by moving our listings online -- and indeed, by instituting web-only editorial features -- and I am concerned about those readers and where they will get this kind of information. But it was our decision to maximize our print space towards reviews and other editorial content. I know some readers don't like it, and I don't like taking something away from them. But these are difficult times.

Q: Were LA readers polled or consulted on the redesign?

A: Not that I'm aware of. This was a decision based on the need to reduce print space. You can't test market that.

Q: You can't bring an online book page into the bath, into the car for later perusal, on a train or accidentally stumble on a review the way you

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Suhil Steinbera, Contributing

do in print -- unless you take the step of printing it out. How will you make up for this lack of portability and spontaneity?

A: This is absolutely right, and it's why the print component is so vital. We don't want the print section to be some vestigial manifestation of a larger online presence, but to have integrity in its own right. At the same time, I'm excited by the possibilities the web opens up for us, by the flexibility we can bring to bear. We'd like to get to the point where the web and print versions are integrated but also independent -- where you get one thing by reading both of them, but something equally autonomous if you look at only one. As for spontaneity, this is, to me, one of the difficulties of the internet. It's interesting because the buzz about the web is that it's a spontaneous medium, that we link from site to site in an intuitive daisy chain. This is true, as it goes, but it's also true that readers often visit a site like ours to read a specific review rather than to go through the entire section end to end. We lose something that way, especially since we tend to plan each print section as a cohesive whole. But this, too, is one of the challenges, and I'm curious to see how it influences the decisions we will ultimately make -- both on the web and in print.

Q: Everyone seems fairly excited about columns, but also a little wary. Here's the reigning question on that front: will you be using the existence of a column (on crime, sci-fi) as an excuse to cut down the number of regular reviews of books in the field covered by the columnist?

A: Not at all; in fact, I've just assigned a couple of stand-alone mystery reviews for the print pages, and I've got a writer working on a big piece on middle reader lit. The columns have been in the air for months now, but we never quite had room to bring them along for the old print section, so when the online opportunity presented itself, they seemed a natural way to start. Eventually, we plan to expand the online columns to cover other areas, and not only genre -- it's a matter of staffing and budget as much as anything else. But again, all this is intended as an enhancement rather than a replacement; as someone who fundamentally doesn't believe in genre as a concept, I would never want to limit coverage for any particular type of book on the basis of some arbitrary literary litmus test.

Q: Has advertising for the pages decreased in past 5 years if there ever was any? If so, have publishers picked up the slack in other ways to support the section? What can publishers do to support your section?

A: I can't speak to the last five years, since I've only been here for a year and a half, but advertising has always been tough, and no, I haven't seen publishers pick up the slack in other ways. In their defense, most publishers seem to be held hostage by the need to buy co-op

Book Editor, Publishers Weekly
Editor, Publishers Weekly
Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer
Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly
Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler

A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips

A Conversation With Barbara J.
King

Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love

An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green

Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist

Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006

Richard Powers

Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London

Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading

Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading

T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2

Q & A with Kiran Desai

Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China

William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research

Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn

Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters

12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie

advertising to promote their books in the national bookstore chains. I'm sympathetic -- the publishers don't really have a choice. But that doesn't leave much advertising money to spread around to regional Book Reviews. Perhaps rather than asking what publishers can do to support the sections, the real question has to do with the industry at large. We are, after all, in this together -- Book Reviews, newspapers, publishers, booksellers -- and we need to start thinking about how everything plays back into the middle. We need to look at the entire structure of the industry.

Q: There is some worry that the LA Times' decision to stop publishing the Book Review as a stand alone section sends a symbolic message, even if there are exactly the same number of words published about books every week. What do you say to that?

A: It's a valid concern, and it's one I share, as well. This is a dire moment for newspaper book sections. Look at what just happened at the Atlanta Journal Constitution, or the closing of the AP book review desk. Look at what happened in Dallas last year. We -- that is, those of us who edit and write for newspaper book sections -- are an endangered species, and I don't think there's an easy solution to our woes. Again, this is why we need to start thinking as a community of like-minded readers and writers for whom books and literature are as essential as food. How do we communicate this -- and I mean really communicate this? How do we compete in a world of faster, flashier entertainments? I'm wary of anything that gets floated as a panacea, but I'm hopeful that the web can help us do that -- not entirely, but to some degree.

Q: It is to some bafflement to those of us on the east coast that the LA Times Book Review would ever find itself needing self-justification at all. LA is a bookish town; you have the best book festival in the country shy of PEN, and there are scores of writers who live in the area. Can you put the financial reasons behind these latest changes in your section in some kind of context?

A: I don't think we need self-justification; I don't think we have ever needed self-justification. We are what we are, and you can take us on our own terms. Indeed, we've worked very hard to develop a West Coast sensibility in Book Review, to assign western books and work with western writers, all of which we will continue to do. That's not to say we ignore national or international writers -- we don't -- just that we mean to speak to and from our region. We are all regional writers, after all, even those who write from the region of New York. As for the financial reasons for the changes, the reality is that the paper needed to make cuts, and we were one of many places that got touched. One of the most common misconceptions that gets tossed around -- and it's actually quite counterproductive -- is that a Book Review (or any section, for

ALVIN

5 Questions for Amy Hempel
Allegra Goodman on Keeping Work Under Her Hat
Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's Working On
Tom Bissell: What He's Working On and What He's Reading
Jonathan Lethem: What He's Working On
Ian McEwan on his Writing Process
Don DeLillo on Actors and Death
Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching Poetry
Dave Eggers on Generosity
Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory
John Updike on Michiko Kakutani
Mary Karr on Roth and Updike and "Blood Meridian"
Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"
Andrew Sean Greer on "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay"
Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books
John Irving on John Irving
Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"
Stewart O'Nan on "The Things They Carried"

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischek
Jason Berry Part I
Jason Berry Part II
Susan Larson
Jason Berry (Part I)
Jason Berry (Part II)
Brad Benischek
Thinking About New Orleans: An Update (6/04/07)
James Lee Burke
Ken Foster

that matter) is somehow an entity unto itself. Ultimately, we exist as part of the larger paper or we don't exist at all. Cuts paper-wide affect us -- sometimes indirectly, as when a writer takes a buyout, and sometimes directly, as in a situation such as this. There was no attempt on the part of the paper to target Book Review. It was just our turn.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 6:43:00 AM



2 COMMENTS:

bhadd said...

I ask the question how periodicals coordinate media will determine all paper news, as Mr. Ulin indicated. Fealty, like blogging, to outdated paradigms.

[The Hood Company](#)

4:08 PM

Brian Carnell said...

"You can't bring an online book page into the bath"

Who are all these people reading while taking a bath? The one time I tried it the magazine slipped and was ruined.

Seriously, is this something a lot of people do? "Honey, I'm going to take a bath, have you seen the latest New York Review of Books?"

1:26 PM

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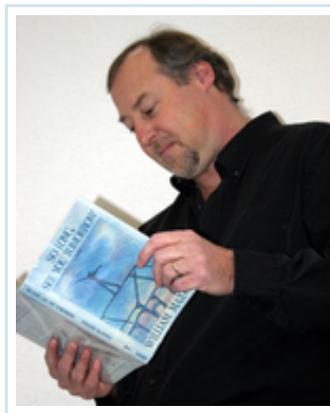
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4/23/2007

Stewart O'Nan on what Shrinking Review Space Means for Writers



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of a blog series featuring posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q&As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

For the literary novelist, it's not just that there are fewer column-inches out there.

The real danger is that what little space is left is taken up by books which are marketing events rather than works in need of a thoughtful critique (Harry Potter, trendy political nonfiction, a celebrity author's latest) or by genre stuff that's essentially review-proof (chick-lit, true crime, mysteries, audiobooks). If you're not a hoary eminence or the new kooky flavor-of-the-month or a boring, important award winner, you're lucky to get any press at all. It's hard to blame book page editors, since they're simply echoing what the industry as a whole is doing, but for the serious writer, the crunch is on from both sides.

--Stewart O'Nan

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 6:43:00 AM



2 COMMENTS:

 Anonymous said...

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Right on!

Except I don't agree with your remark that true crime is review-proof - I'd love to hear more on why you think so.

As the only person on the internet who regularly reviews true crime books, I get absolutely pounded with review requests and ARCs. These folks can't get reviewed otherwise.

Laura James
Clews

9:48 AM

 Kathryn Casey said...

As a true crime author, I'm curious as well. Why is true crime review-proof?

Kathryn Casey

12:03 AM

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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4/23/2007

Did you get the Memo?

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q&As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

MEMORANDUM

From: The League of Fascists, Bullies, Oppressors, and Dopes (LFBOD)

To: The Membership

Dudes (and Emily):

Great news! Several major newspapers have radically reduced their books coverage! As we discussed at our little confab last month, this is super news in terms of our overall Yearly Goal #3, "Dumbing Down the Populace So That, Like a Stunned Goose, They May Be Plucked." As you will remember, we concluded that one of the most effective ways of hamstringing/eroding democracy is to render the populace less articulate, which in turn reduces the citizen's ability to express himself or herself in words, which in turn makes the citizenry more inclined to think in big vague generalities, as well as making them more anxious and aggressive. Which is when we sweep in!

For centuries, books and the intelligent discussion of same by impassioned blah blah blah has served to sharpen the wit of the nation and make the people less susceptible to trickery. So it is with great delight that I announce this watershed day for all of us who dream of someday living in a nation where brute force, ancient prejudices, and the power-seeking will of the few prevail. Let's hope this trend continues! It would be fantastic if we could achieve a few more of our goals this year, such as (1) continuing our important work against the independent bookstore, (2) the gradual "borrowing" of all dictionaries

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David L. Ulin on the new Los Angeles Times Book Re...

and burning of same, and (3) the replacement of all books in the library with Internet portals, which don't actually connect to anything, but just show cartoons all day.

Anyway, carry on! My hope is that, when we meet again next year, speaking not in words but grunts, not a single paper in America will have a books editor or a books magazine, and in fact no one will write about books anymore, except, of course, for my book, "Don't Get All Intellectual on Me: The Power of Broad Crude Thought!"

With very best regards, your Chairman,
Lance "Brownshirt" Smathers

(as dictated to [George Saunders](#))

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 6:45:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

 [lukeoneil47](#) said...

As usual, Saunders nails the point succinctly, and with great humor.

www.thethicalscumbg.blogspot.com

12:03 PM

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4/23/2007

How to get Involved in Saving Book Reviews

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of a [blog series](#) featuring posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q&As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

If you're reading these posts about book coverage in America today and are worried about our critical dialogue --don't worry there are things you can do. Here are a few:

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#1) Sign a petition. The NBCC has started a [petition to protest the removal of Teresa Weaver's job from the Atlanta Journal Constitution](#). In just over a day, it picked up several hundred signatures, including those of James Lee Burke, Michael Connelly, Karin Slaughter, Denis Lehane, Allan Gurganus, Anne Fadiman, Gary Shteyngart, Todd Gitlin, Robert Draper, Craig Nova, Clyde Edgerton, Julie Phillips, Troy Jollimore and dozens more writers.

#2) Write to your local paper. Believe it or not, someone does read those letters and if you live in a town affected by these cutbacks -- or have no book section at all -- get involved. Local independent booksellers have been key in the campaign down in Atlanta, and would most likely be great place to begin with in your home town. In coming weeks, the NBCC will take this campaign to other cities and other newspapers where book coverage is at risk.

#3) Engage with literary discussion -- even if it means just writing in to a blog, or joining a book club, or going to your local library for a discussion of a book: the more we talk about books, the better chance we have at defining our own cultural values, [rather than having them defined for us](#).

#4) [Join the NBCC](#). If you're a working critic and have published three reviews (online or in print) over the past five years, join us -- the more

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voices we have behind us, the greater our chances will be at preserving the cultural dialogue in this country.

#5) Send these posts to a friend. If you're reading this post, chances are you have a friend or two who like to read -- probably many. Send a link to these posts to them and ask them to pass it along. There's a reason why this blog is called Critical Mass.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 6:45:00 AM



8 COMMENTS:



Donna Seaman said...

As book lovers so often observe, literature is a grand conversation, and book reviews have long been integral to this invaluable exchange. Stories, observations, discoveries, and knowledge expressed in clear, thoughtful, expressive, engaging, and intriguing language is essential for our well-being as individuals and as a society. Critical response to books of all kinds keeps us vital, connected, receptive, empathic, and involved. As an NBCC member, I'm so grateful to the current NBCC board for providing a forum for readers and writers to speak up forthrightly and dynamically in protest over the demolition and diminishment of newspaper book review sections. Newspapers have always played an essential role in our democracy, and books belong in newspapers as part of the mix that constitutes news, culture, and life. We must defend what we need and love, from clean air and water to biodiversity and a diversity of books and book reviews.

5:41 PM



Clay Reynolds said...

mI am approaching the authorship of my 800th book review. A vast majority of these reviews have been published in periodicals such as PW, Kirkus, and other magazines; I also have written for the New York Times, Philadelphia Inquirer, and other major city Sunday book pages. I am a regular contributor to the Dallas Morning News, at present, a book page that has seen the amount of space devoted to book review shrink drastically over the past twenty years. At the present time, it is still hanging on.

Book reviewing is probably one of the least well understood of all literary efforts. It also can be one of the most controversial. Although such writers as Gore Vidal and William Goldman have assailed book critics, sometimes humorously, most all other writers of note have recognized the significant impact of book reviews on the life and expectations of published work. As an

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Reviews*

*Sign a Petition Protesting the AJC's
cutting of it...*

*Hal Crowther Remembers Molly
Ivins*

*In Spain, the Sun Shines Everyday,
and all the Lit...*

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*The Rest of the Best: The Books
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Best Book Survey*

To see Who Voted for What and

author of books, myself, I am sensitive to the power that book critics have not only on the success or failure of any given title, but also on the professional future of a writer.

The meat and potatoes of book criticism remains in the Sunday book pages of major city dailies. I can't provide statistics, only observation, but it has been mine that more people read and react to reviews in those pages than actually read books. Certainly book buyers read the reviews and form their opinions based on what they've read.

Maintaining the integrity and the honesty of book critics in this vital publishing format is essential to the entire book publishing process. Coming to know and respect the bylines of book reviewers is an important element in the average reader's makeup. Removing this by publishing only anonymous wire-service reviews would remove this element, or at best, compromise it. It will have a devastating effect on publishing.

At the same time, it doesn't take a degree in journalism to know that book reviews (like movie reviews, recipes, gardening columns, and so forth) are filler. They are not hard news, and every column inch they occupy is a column inch that could be devoted to advertising that pays. Paying an editor and free lance or staff reviewers is also expensive.

But newspaper publishers might want to ask themselves why people still buy newspapers. The hard news of the front page is generally covered before the paper hits the streets by the internet, television and radio news. People who buy and read newspapers are looking for something more than a quick overview. They are looking for more depth, breadth, and extent of coverage.

More, though, they are looking for other things. They are, seriously, looking for gardening tips and recipes, they're also looking for obituaries and feature columns from their favorite (often local) columnists on subjects ranging from politics to sports to religion to society to what movie to see this weekend.

And they're looking for book reviews.

If there's an argument to be made to save the book pages of major city Sunday papers it's that. It's that the local paper has an obligation to its readers to provide more than furniture ads and announcements of a great deal on new cars. It also has an obligation to provide intelligent, honest and fair journalistic editorial response to the culture and society it serves. Book reviews do this.

I am a professional book reviewer, and I'm also an academic. I have published literary criticism of a "serious sort," more than two hundred articles and essays and several books. When my

Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

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Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

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The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

colleagues in the academy make disparaging remarks about book reviewing as being somehow a "lesser" form of criticism than the work they may be doing, I am quick to point out that more people read and respond to any one of my book reviews than have read or responded to all of my academic scholarship put together. I reach people with my opinions on books.

This doesn't mean I'm always right. It doesn't mean that my opinion matters more than anyone else's. It does mean, though, that I have an obligation as a book reviewer to be honest, objective, fair, and to maintain a sense of integrity and gravity in every review I write.

I am proud to be a book critic. I am sensitive to what book critics write about my fiction. I am respectful of their right to dislike my work, provided that their reviews are balanced, well thought-out and reflective of the best principles of journalistic practice.

Book reviews are important. Very important. We must take whatever steps we can to preserve this important part of the fifth estate. The future of quality publishing and writing depends on it.

10:41 PM

 Gerard Jones said...

Book reviews are advertising. Book reviewers are skills for the marketing departments of big publishers. So is the NBCC. Book awards are hype, bought and paid for like any other hype. So-called writers aspire to get themselves on bestseller lists. "Good" reviews and awards by the stooges of sales guys get them there. Big whoop. Books are commercial commodities, the same as Corn Flakes. With pretty packaging and plenty of hype, any piece of junk can become a work of lasting literature...for a month or two, then it's on to sell something new, to hype something different. As long as books are nothing but yet another means to make money, book reviewers aren't going to be anything but advertisers and low paid publicists and nothing worth reading, writing or reviewing is gonna get read, written or reviewed. The only people who care whether book reviews and book awards are eliminated or not are agents, editors and publishers and their motives are strictly commercial. G.

12:23 PM

 ensie said...

As a bookstore employee, I see a significant amount of traffic generated from book reviews.

It would be a terrible shame to see local and national reviews disappear.

Have you thought about creating a badge that people can post on

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, *Publishers Weekly*

Frank Wilson, Book Editor, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic, *Entertainment Weekly*

Carole Goldberg, Book Editor, *Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*

Richard Powers

*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

Q & A with Kiran Desai

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and*

their own web pages/blogs? It's a simple way to help spread the word.

2:34 PM

 lizzie skurnick said...

Hi Ensie--we are working on making a button to use on other sites right now!

2:48 PM

 Sarah Gold said...

As a reviews editor at Publishers Weekly, I have the luxury of working at a magazine that understands the importance of book reviews. But the larger world seems to be losing this understanding.

Book coverage seems to be viewed as less crucial in the past--I am often stunned to see issues of Time and Newsweek with not a single book review.

Podcasts such as the L.A. Times is planning are wonderful, but they are not a substitute for intelligent criticism. Less book review space means fewer books will be brought to the public's attention (woe to the midlist novel!), and it means there will be fewer voices weighing in on each book. And we all know how important a multiplicity of voices is--every reviewer brings different views, strengths and tastes to a book.

1:59 PM

 elam said...

i don't always read book reviews. i will if it catches my eye. what it comes down to for me is. I would like the choice. i love looking at the art. book covers are amazing these days. and i think people are just as passionate about a good book as they ever were. so please lets continue to give ourselves the choice.

10:12 AM

 Anonymous said...

There are a lot of great books out there but like anything else, you have to know what you're searching for. One book I can recommend is entitled, Behind The Velvet Curtain by Dominique Stone. Dominique Stone did a great job developing the story line and making the characters come alive!

3:44 AM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

[It's Only An Opinion, But...](#)

[Union-Tribune Cuts Book Review](#)

[Why It's Foolish for Newspapers to Dump Book Review Sections](#)

*Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*
*12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie*
5 Questions for Amy Helpel
*Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*
*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's
Working On*
*Tom Bissell: What He's Working
On and What He's Reading*
*Jonathan Lethem: What He's
Working On*
*Ian McEwan on his Writing
Process*
Don DeLillo on Actors and Death
*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching
Poetry*
Dave Eggers on Generosity
Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory
John Updike on Michiko Kakutani
*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike
and "Blood Meridian"*
Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"
*Andrew Sean Greer on "The
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier
and Clay"*
Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books
John Irving on John Irving
Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"
*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things
They Carried"*

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischek
Jason Berry Part I
Jason Berry Part II
Susan Larson
Jason Berry (Part I)
Jason Berry (Part II)
Brad Benischek
*Thinking About New Orleans: An
Update (6/04/07)*

Why Should I Care What You Think?
Assinaturas
Campanha salvem os críticos literários!
Helvetica Turns 50
Save the Book Reviews!
An obituary for newspaper book reviews?
They'll Never Take My Lit Crit
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Easy For Me to Say
Red de boekrecensie!
The Endangered Book Review

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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4/24/2007

Rick Moody: Speak Up in Defense of Book Reviews



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of a the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-

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Jane Ciabattari

Rigoberto Gonzalez

Mary Ann Gwinn

James Marcus

Maureen McLane

eds, Q&As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

As many of you may know, I personally have ample reason to detest that modern institution of deracinated book criticism known as "book reviewing." For this reason: I am widely regarded to have received one of the worst reviews ever written. (I won't remind you if you didn't read it or hear about it.) I admit, it's true, that there are days when I would be happy to blast most of the well-known book reviewers in the United States out into space.

However, detesting particular reviewers is quite a bit different from wanting to rid our national culture of the medium as a whole. And that is exactly what some of the larger regional newspapers in our country are doing right now.

Recently, book review editors in several major municipalities have

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either been fired or found their positions endangered, as papers have scaled back on book reviewing or have begun running reviews from the wire services. With this in mind, how long until book coverage is scrapped entirely at these publications?

There are many reasons why this makes business sense to the managers at these newspapers, not the least of which is that newspapers are suffering with dwindling readerships (and declining stock prices, etc.), and are having to make ugly decisions about staff cuts, in order to preserve their own jobs. But because the reasoning is explicable doesn't make it ethically sound.

Book culture drives American culture. The ideas and innovation in American books trickle down from there into the media as a whole, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly. To avoid giving books their due attention is to miss out on this engine of American culture, the furnace in which originality often finds its origin. Instead of lamenting declining readership, cultural editors at our newspapers could be creating readers, not only for the books themselves, but for the book pages at major newspapers, by treating the books as cultural events, which they, of course, legitimately are.

This in turn would create the opportunity for a more carefully reasoned and thoughtful book criticism, one that explicates and investigates, instead of engaging in three column inches of plot summary.

We can't fix what's broken, though, if we who read and care about books don't speak up for the book pages at our newspapers. American newspapers are meant to provide a service to their readers, and this I know well, as my own grandfather was for many years the publisher of the *New York Daily News*. The service provided by newspapers involves reflecting the needs and interests of the readership.

If you care about books, if you care about reading, please take the time to speak up for it, in these dark cultural days. Demand quality book coverage from your paper. It worked in San Francisco, where the book section was reinstated after protests in the community. Your voice counts in the debate. So speak up. If you don't who do you think will? -Rick Moody

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:33:00 AM



5 COMMENTS:

Chuck said...

Rick Moody is 100% right. If we don't do something NOW about this culturally-suicidal trend of diminishing book coverage, we're going to regret it later, after the carnage is done.

8:58 AM

Review Space Means...

David L. Ulin on the new Los Angeles Times Book Re...

NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews

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In Spain, the Sun Shines Everyday, and all the Lit...

Video of the 2006 NBCC Events Now Online

A Conversation with Beverly Jarrett, University of...

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Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future

The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30 Books in 30 Days

How We Choose Links for Roundup

What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?

Pub Date? What Pub Date? also Embargo Follies

On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books

The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey

Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey

To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book

 Anonymous said...

I find most of the New York Times book reviews to be pretentious and focused on the novelty of the review instead of the clarity of the book critique

10:16 AM

 Janice Harayda said...

I agree with most of what Rick said. But the NBCC campaign might be much more effective if took a broader view than focusing just on saving Sunday book sections. Because paper is so expensive, some newspapers may believe they must shrink or eliminate these sections no matter we say.

But many newspapers -- even if they have to cut Sunday pages -- could fold a review into the daily entertainment or opinion section. If they did this five or six times a week, you'd have the equivalent of a page on Sunday. And editors might be less sympathetic to a "Save the Sunday book section" argument than to, "Replace one of those Paris Hilton articles in the daily paper with a book review."

So I'd like to see the NBCC lobby editors hard to add daily reviews if they have shrunk or cut the Sunday section. I would also like to see the NBCC develop a feed of reviews that papers could use for this purpose. The NBCC could charge papers either 1) a monthly or annual fee based on size or 2) for individual reviews (put the fee at the top, the way wire services do with articles available only for purchase). This would make it less likely that a paper would just pick up review from the New York Times.

Speaking as someone who spent 11 years as book editor of The Plain Dealer and knows how frustrating it can be to lose space, I hope the NBCC will continue this worthy campaign. But if the NBCC focuses exclusively on Sunday sections, it may look as though it's just trying to save members' job. Saving jobs is important. But so is keeping a serious conversation about books going by any means possible.

11:13 AM

 Jason said...

Is the real issue behind shrinking book reviews that there will be less paid reviewing? Are underemployed writers simply worried that they won't have that stream of income?

The elimination of book reviews is part of the larger move away from monolithic corporations (like the Tribune) handing down verdicts on content of all kinds. We have the internet now. Everyone can hand down their own verdict.

If it is true that newspapers are dying, doesn't it make sense that

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

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Earth to Academia

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Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San

book reviews would be the first organ to fail? What does the market say about this?

I'm sympathetic, but unmoved.

1:33 PM



Martha Southgate said...

I completely agree with Rick here about the need for a place where most people (not just those who are blog and/or internet savvy) can read about and engage with reasoned opinions about literature.

As a person who has reviewed for a number of major newspapers, I've got to respond to the above comment by Jason: Let me tell you--it's no income stream. More like a trickle, even if you write for the largest papers. Don't cry for the demise of the book review if you don't feel inclined to. But believe me, those who object to the death of the book review are not distressed because of the thousands of dollars they won't be making writing reviews. Book reviewing is no way to make a living.

11:27 PM

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4/24/2007

Susan Larson, New Orleans Times-Picayune Book Editor



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which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

Q. Your section was folded into "Living" and the budget cut after Katrina. How have you handled this change?

A. Until Katrina, our book pages appeared at the end of a freestanding Sunday Travel section; after Katrina, our Food, Travel and Book sections were all folded into Living, the natural place for our readers to look for our features. In many ways, it meant no change at all -- working with the same wonderful Living editor/page designer I've always worked with, the same copy editors -- except for the reduction in space. But I am writing more than ever, and I must use wire copy from time to time. As soon as it was at all feasible, we were given a regular Sunday page; now that space is up to a page and a half, sometimes two. Living is where all my author interviews appear, and those editors, who all love books, have been extremely generous with space, so many of my stories are finding a place there as well as occasional placements in our weekend entertainment guide, Lagniappe. We send all of our book reviews to our web site, nola.com.

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Q. As book editor of the Times Picayune and author of "The Booklover's Guide to New Orleans," you are at the epicenter of a cultural treasure. How has the world of books and authors changed after Katrina? And is there an update of your book in the works?

A. I did a long piece last fall about what I call our "literary infrastructure," the complicated interconnected community of writers, bookstores (as a former independent bookseller myself, I rejoice in the longevity and number of our independent bookstores), libraries, festivals, creative writing programs, etc. After Katrina, I have to say that the commitment to the literary life here is strong and fierce, with remarkable crowds turning out for readings and signings. The independent bookstores have come back with great strength (although we lost Michele Lewis' Afro-American Book Stop and Mary Price Dunbar's Beaucoup Books, they continue to sell books online), the books continue to come in great numbers, and the literary festivals, while struggling financially, have returned.

An anonymous donor recently gave the Tulane creative writing program \$1.5 million over five years, which is making all kinds of things possible for the university; Toni Morrison appeared there last week, speaking to one of the largest and most diverse audiences I've seen in New Orleans. And new writers continue not only to arrive, but to emerge, with strong programs already in place at the University of New Orleans and the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts.

I think most of our established writers have returned, actually, though I don't have any firm numbers to back that up. Many writers are struggling in their work, of course. What are the narrative strategies for dealing with cataclysmic change in a landscape and culture? How do you maintain any kind of creative energy when you've lost your home? Nonfiction has come quickly, but fiction takes longer, as we've seen from the 9/11 books. And we'll have to see what the market will bear, but our writers are in it for the long haul.

One of the best things to happen here post-K was the 2006 American Library Association convention, such a sign of faith in the city; our libraries continue to struggle with both physical and financial recovery. At this writing, the New Orleans Public Library system still is without a City Librarian, which is a grim sign indeed.

"The Booklover's Guide to New Orleans" is currently out of print, and I thank you for asking; I am working on an update.

Q. How do events like the Tennessee Williams festival keep book culture alive?

A. "Rebirth" and "renewal" are everyday words here, but this spring has been especially fine for books. There are more than 50 titles by local writers or on local topics in the coming months. The Tennessee Williams festival was in fine form; I was particularly struck by what a good job they did on Williams' non-dramatic work, with panels devoted

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routine, and feeling glum about
the future
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them?
Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies
On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books
The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey
Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey
To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey*

to his notebooks (with editor Margaret Bradham Thornton), memoirs (with John Waters!) and poetry. The festival featured Richard Ford, Yusef Komunyakaa, Michael Lewis and Calvin Trillin, as well as a legion of hometown favorites. What's not to love at an event that sells mint juleps at the door? At Jazzfest, when many, many authors will appear at the book tent sponsored by the New Orleans Gulf South Booksellers Association; proceeds benefit local literacy projects. This fall will bring the Louisiana Book Festival and Words and Music: A Literary Feast in New Orleans, sponsored by the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society. One of the best things about living in a festive culture is that New Orleans audiences know how to participate, with lively questions, respect for celebrity and great good humor. These events are so important in bringing readers and writers together, encouraging aspiring writers by bringing a bit of the New York marketplace to New Orleans, and reinforcing that sense of community and continuity. Even though we are not one of the top book markets in the nation, we have always had a thriving literary scene.

Q.How important are book reviews and pages in your publication devoted to reporting and criticism of books to your literary community?

A.From reader feedback and seeing the crowds at literary events, I'd have to say that they're very important. New Orleans takes great pride in its literary reputation; a lot of people work very hard to make things happen here, and I'm only one of them. I'm struck by how many of us wear more than one hat; many writers serve on boards, turn out for charities; publisher Joseph Billingsley (Pelican Publishing) organizes the Bloomsday celebration every June; bookseller Britton Trice is also a publisher; Joe DeSalvo and Rosemary James of Faulkner House Books are founders of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society; Ken Foster writes and teaches and works with Silence is Violence; Abram Himmelstein does all that fine work with the Neighborhood Story Project; historian Pat Brady writes her own books and takes the time to serve as president of the Tennessee Williams Festival; Joshua Clark is a writer and publisher who started KARES (Katrina Artists Relief and Emergency Support).

Q. How has the world of books and book criticism changed in New Orleans during your years at the helm?

A.I've been fortunate to have my job during a great time for New Orleans writers. Since the 90s, many writers associated with New Orleans and Louisiana, received great recognition -- Stephen Ambrose, James Lee Burke, Douglas Brinkley, Robert Olen Butler, Richard Ford, Ernest Gaines, Walter Isaacson, Yusef Komunyakaa, Nicholas Lemann, Michael Lewis, Anne Rice, Cokie Roberts, to name the obvious ones. There's an obvious rationale to cover those writers! So book coverage has increased over the years. And while people always speak of "golden ages" in New Orleans literature, the truth is, the flow of writing from and about this place never really stops.I've worked very hard to open up the book page a bit, coordinate advance coverage with public events,

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

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*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
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*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
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*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle*

and I think we've done a good job in reaching out to the common reader, while at the same time we have wonderful columnists and scholars and writers who appear on our book pages. Our emphasis, now more than ever, is on regional literary culture. Of course, The Times-Picayune has its own long distinguished literary history, hence its commitment to book coverage.

Q.What's it like to ride in the Krewe of the Muses?

A. I'm actually a non-riding member on the waiting list, lucky to get a spot in 2006, 2007 and again for 2008. It's probably the most frivolous thing I do, but riding on a float for a couple of hours is worth a year on a psychiatrist's couch! Muses is a krewe that prides itself on community involvement, and our honorary Muse this year was Brenda Marie Osbey, Louisiana poet laureate. That first Mardi Gras was such a celebration of the city; this year was bigger and better. I can still remember my husband going to the first Muses parade, chasing a float, saying "I'm an English professor! I need Muses beads!"

Q.How was your own personal life changed by Katrina? And your life as an author?

A.I struggle, as everyone does, to live in New Orleans now, to see it clearly. I'll never leave, I do believe that, because this city has made me who I am. My husband, Julian Wasserman, and I came here in 1985 with our then three year-old daughter because we knew we wanted to work and raise our family here. Julian died in 2003. My 24-year-old daughter is now a graduate student in the English department at Duke, and my 17-year-old son, who likes to call himself our family's "only true New Orleanian," is a junior in high school here. The kids and I have thought a lot about our losses, our commitments, in the days since the storm, and felt a deepened sense of both. New Orleans is home.

In my writing, I've felt an increased sense of urgency, of course, a real need to get it right. Part of the reason I'm going back to "The Booklover's Guide" is to make the point that for writers and readers, much of what they've always loved about New Orleans has survived and is still here, waiting to be revisited or discovered. And we need folks to come down here and see for themselves.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Thinking About New Orleans](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:08:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

Kevin Allman said...

Lovely, lively interview.

Susan's book section in the Times-Picayune is a perfect

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*

Richard Powers

*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

Q & A with Kiran Desai

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

12 Questions for Chimamanda

argument for throwing out the wire-service reviews and keeping the focus local, local, local.

New Orleanians love to read about themselves. That's not an appetite that can be slaked by running a 12-inch AP review of the latest Janet Evanovich. It takes someone local, on the ground, connected with the community.

If newspapers are to survive in the digital age, they need to provide content that readers can't get elsewhere, be it from the wires or from the Net...in other words, local content, written by and for locals. Susan is an excellent example of an editor who overcomes meager newspaper resources and produces a section that serves both her local writers' community and her local readers.

2:04 PM

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LINKS TO THIS POST:

[The Death of book reviews=The Death of books...](#)

[CritMass: Thoughts on book reviews](#)

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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4/25/2007

NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews Roundup

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

Another seismic shift this morning: The [Chicago Tribune](#) is moving its book section from Sunday to Saturday in May (more on that later this week). NBCC Balakian award winner [Scott McLemee devotes his insidehighered.com column](#) "Intellectual Affairs" to the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews today. He notes: "Needless to say, there have always been severe limits to the depth and range of literary coverage at newspapers (After 20 years of reviewing for them, I realize that as well as anyone.) But book pages have a modest but significant role in constituting regional literary communities. They are part of a local public sphere that often includes--don't forget--scholars who review books as well as write them. Perhaps online media will take up the slack? Let's hope so. But the destruction of the remaining 'reviewing infrastructure' at American newspapers is a bad thing for authors, for readers, for booksellers, and for publishers.

New York magazine [tips its hat to Rick Moody](#) for his Critical Mass post yesterday. [Publishers Weekly's Craig Morgan Teicher](#) weighs in on our campaign.

And there are 2320 signatures to date on our online [petition](#) on behalf of the Atlanta Constitution Journal's book editor. If you haven't signed, take a moment to join James Lee Burke, Richard Ford, Edwige Danticat, Francine Prose, Melissa Bank, Sean Wilsey, Joan Micklin Silver, Chitra Divakaruni, George Garrett, John Dufresne, Colum McCann, Dennis Cooper, Christopher Coake, Chase Twichell, Chris Offutt, Susan Shreve, Sanford G. Thatcher, director of Penn State University Press and President-Elect of the Association of American University Presses, who says, "I have to express my dismay that a distinguished newspaper like the Atlanta Journal Constitution would

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Rick Moody: [Speak Up in Defense of Book Reviews](#)

see fit to downgrade its coverage of books and book culture. Not only is this a concern for university presses in general, which publish books of wide interest as well as scholarly monographs, but it is a particular concern for presses that have strong regional lists, like the University of Georgia Press. They depend especially on reviews in regional media to bring their books to the attention of general readers at whom these regional titles are generally aimed. I hope the newspaper will reconsider its decision and help keep book culture in the South alive and well." And Sean Chercover, who writes, "My grandfather, C.J. Holleran, worked for the Atlanta Constitution. I spent my childhood summers in Georgia and I set some of my debut novel on Saint Simons Island. By contributing to the national cultural dialog, the state of Georgia helps enrich the country. Do your state proud, and continue to be a part of that dialog. Continue reviewing books."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:43:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

 Deborah Cook said...

I'd love to see a newspaper publish a book section comprised of all this commentary in one place!

1:04 PM

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[Economic Downturn Hits Literary Journals](#)

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4/25/2007

Andrei Codrescu: Newspapers Drop Book Pages



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

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The attention paid to new fiction and poetry books in this country is desultory. We are living through one of the richest creative moments in writing history in the U.S., but the more books are being published, the less attention they are being paid. This is an old complaint, but truer all the time, and about to become acute. If newspapers are now abandoning their book pages in favor of web-style snippets about "ideas," which may or may not include books, we are definitely at the end of something. What that something is is hard to say: is it the end of a shared book culture, the end of the general reader, the end of a fading taste-ocracy?

On the other hand, this may also be the beginning of something and the alarm is welcome. Newspaper book reviews are never the sharpest essays on the block, and books signalled by newspapers rarely sell on the strength of reviews. Book reviewers for most metropolitan newspapers, with notable exceptions, are people who read too much and not very well, and write even worse than they read. That old warhorse, The New York Times Book Review, has only held out as long as it has because the paper commissions reviews from people more or less connected to a book's subject or, rarely, to some intellectual activity. Unfortunately, even that sort of distribution isn't enough to keep the NYTBR from yellowing at ten times the rate of any other section in the Sunday paper.

I submit three causes and three reasons not to despair. The causes are

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

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[Susan Larson, New Orleans Times-Picayune Book Edit...](#)

as follows: 1) the cultural critic, aka, the public intellectual has disappeared or has metamorphosed into a radio talk show host, opinion maker, pundit, or general hustler about town with more irons in the fire than mere books; 2) the writing and reading of books are not connected activities; many are called to write books, few feel the urge to read them, and 3) the culture of the fragment, written and visual, has overthrown the considered paragraph, or, clinically put, ADHD is the next evolutionary or devolutionary state.

The "don't despair" reasons are as follows: 1) we are Americans and we care for practical books about how to do things and how to live, and we do read those things that fit the bill, reviews or no reviews; 2) the readers have specialized and they get wind of their books through the internet, and 3) a vast number of the literary books being published are only long essays on literature, reviews or rewritings of other books; if this is the case, we do in fact have an intense literary conversation going on, but it's not in the newspapers, it's in the books themselves; it's the books reviewing the books.

I realize that I haven't made even a tiny bit of a case for keeping the current book pages in newspapers alive, but I do believe that from the great din of the deeply cultured mass of books being published there can surface a class of public talkers willing to limit their thoughts to 500 to 750 words and astonish the readers of newspapers with fresh ideas and fun language. What I propose is replacing all current book reviews and reviewers with hungry and smart book writers who can air feuillets in the Sunday papers. The papers are constantly looking to redesign, but rarely look at content. Most book review sections look old, are droned out by bored old reviewers, and are about the same old books. You can't blame your general reader for getting more out of the cartoons. All it takes is one smart radical editor per paper, and that's only a few dozen smart people in the whole country. I have that many in my cell phone.

--[Andrei Codrescu](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Thinking About New Orleans](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 10:10:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

[Kevin Allman](#) said...

If all book reviews were as shabbily thought out and as poorly argued as this essay, I'd agree with Andrei Codrescu.

"What I propose is replacing all current book reviews and reviewers with hungry and smart book writers who can air feuillets in the Sunday papers."

*Rick Moody: Speak Up in Defense
of Book Reviews*

*How to get Involved in Saving
Book Reviews*

Did you get the Memo?

*Stewart O'Nan on what Shrinking
Review Space Means...*

*David L. Ulin on the new Los
Angeles Times Book Re...*

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*Sign a Petition Protesting the AJC's
cutting of it...*

*Hal Crowther Remembers Molly
Ivins*

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Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

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*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

Certainly book review editors are always looking for better reviewers, fresher voices, and more expert opinions...as they should be. But I'd suggest that book review sections, for the most part, ARE filled with "hungry and smart book writers." I don't think there's an entire class of superior reviewers being left outside the gates by either design or caprice.

But it was this thought that really cheesed me:

"[T]he cultural critic, aka, the public intellectual has disappeared or has metamorphosed into a radio talk show host, opinion maker, pundit, or general hustler about town with more irons in the fire than mere books."

Kinda rich coming from an NPR contributor with his own alt-weekly column and a pundit gig on "Nightline."

1:47 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

Good Morning!

Why p-newspapers shouldn't give up on book sections: Wisdom for
...

Some links. No big whoop.

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4/25/2007

Marie Arana, Book Editor, The Washington Post, & Colleagues



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

I've been in this business a long time, and I can't remember when book

review sections were not in peril. Newspaper staffs are filled with people who don't understand what we do or why readers love us, even though the very public they serve tells them often and strongly that books are important to their lives.

A recent arts and entertainment survey of Washington Post readers shows that interest in book news is second only to interest in restaurants. That means that readers want book information more than they want information on new movies, pop music concerts, live theater, or even newly released DVDs. And yet when the accountants come around

wanting to cut the newsroom's budget, it's always book sections that are scrutinized first. It takes strong executive editors and publishers to appreciate what many newsroom functionaries do not: that despite our lack of ads, despite the paucity of support from book publishers, the hard-core readers of newspapers (serious readers who know that their children's futures depend on education) are more than likely the people

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[NBCC Campaign to Save Book](#)

[Reviews Roundup](#)

children's books depend on education, are more than they are people who buy and read books.

We're lucky to have that kind of leadership at The Post. Long before my time at the paper, in the late 1970s, Book World was converted into a broadsheet and folded in with the opinion section for "cost saving reasons" (although, ironically, the paper was flush with post-Watergate success at the time). There was such a hue and cry from area readers and the capital's intellectual community that publisher Katharine Graham insisted the section be returned to its original form. We've been the same stand-alone tabloid ever since. Sixteen pages. And even though there is an ever-expanding rush of titles from the industry, our space never grows. It takes three full-page ads to bump us to twenty pages. A luxury we've seldom had.

Interestingly enough, a little more than a year ago, when The Post's head of advertising, Katharine Weymouth, looked into our situation and assigned a dedicated salesperson to Book World, our ad revenue began to blossom. Unlike the New York Times book review, which has a whole sales team, we had never had such a person before. Someone whose job it was to be imaginative and proactive about selling ads into our pages. Ad sales at Book World had always been a receivership, not a creative and aggressive enterprise. What does that mean? That with some effort and ingenuity, book review pages can pay their way. (No one, by the way, ever asks this of sports pages or opinion pages.) But as I say, it takes a strong leadership to put out that shielding hand and make something valuable grow.

I've asked four of our critics (two of whom are also editors on Book World's staff) to tell you why they think book review pages are critical to good newspapers. Here are their comments:

"For more than four decades I have been involved in newspaper book coverage at all levels, from a small, weekly book page to a large, stand-alone section. I know from long experience that newspaper readers--people who are, after all, *readers*--treasure these sections and depend on them for important news and opinions. It is essential that, in a changing newspaper world, these sections be supported and strengthened by all the newspapers that publish them." *Jonathan Yardley, Book Critic, The Washington Post*

"In an age that seems always more accelerated and superficial, a good book section helps readers stay tuned to the deepest ideas coursing through society. Let the A-section cover current events, let the feature pages attend to this season's trends, but don't lose sight of books, those curious, slowly produced reflections on where we've been, where we're going, and what it all means. If the lure of hyper-linked e-media is drawing away our audience and killing the newspaper business, it's suicidal for papers to starve the section that speaks most directly to careful, patient readers. At the same time, our cosmic importance mustn't become an excuse for turgid or self-absorbed book coverage.

*Susan Larson, New Orleans
Times-Picayune Book Edit...*

*Rick Moody: Speak Up in Defense
of Book Reviews*

*How to get Involved in Saving
Book Reviews*

Did you get the Memo?

*Stewart O'Nan on what Shrinking
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*Sign a Petition Protesting the AJC's
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*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

There's no use blaming our shrinking audience all the way to the grave. I'm reminded of Henry David Thoreau's wry anecdote about an Indian who was shocked that a wealthy lawyer in town wouldn't buy his baskets. "He had not discovered," Thoreau writes, "that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy them, or at least make him think that it was so." Let's be honest with ourselves: Companies (even newspapers!) survive by offering things that people want. Our best job security rests on producing book coverage that's engaging, entertaining, and relevant." *Ron Charles, Book World Senior Editor, The Washington Post*

"Every blogger wants to write a book. In fact, the dirty little secret of the internet is "Littera scripta manet"--the written word survives. A book is real, whereas cyberspace is just keystrokes--quickly scribbled and quickly forgotten. But to publish a book isn't enough: It has to be noticed. And this is where book sections matter. If you were an author, would you want your book reviewed in The Washington Post and The New York Review of Books--or on a website written by someone who uses the moniker NovelGobbler or Biografiend? The book review section, whether of a newspaper or a magazine, remains the forum where new titles are taken seriously as works of art and argument, and not merely as opportunities for shallow grandstanding and overblown ranting, all too often by kids hoping to be noticed for their sass and vulgarity. Should we allow our culture to descend to this playground level of discourse? Newspapers sift, filter, and evaluate; they are responsible and strive to be trustworthy. So, too, do their book review sections. To curtail such coverage is to abandon an intellectual forum for a childish free-for-all. We would be shortchanging not only readers, but also the art, culture and scholarship of our time. Playgrounds, as we all remember, are ruled by bullies, loud-mouths and prima-donnas.

"The newspaper cannot compete with television or the computer for instant news updates. But it can offer in-depth coverage, more thoughtful analysis, amusing commentary, and the kind of articles that people clip and stick on their refrigerators or in their purses and files. Book reviews serve precisely this function, and always have. A book review section is, in its way, the canary in the coal mine: The health of a newspaper can be measured by its book coverage. When that is diminished, so is the quality of the newspaper. Instead of trimming book coverage, the wise publisher would beef it up. After all, the people who make up the hard-core readership of newspapers are also the people who buy and care for books. A newspaper that takes away its book review section ends up alienating its most faithful--and influential--readers." *Michael Dirda, Book World Columnist, The Washington Post*

"Book review sections are where readers go to make sense of the daily news---to get the long view on everything from Iraq to healthcare to hip-hop. (Indeed, how much of the discussion of Iraq has been driven by such books as George Baker's "The Assassin's Gate," Tom Dicks'

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San

by such books as George Facker's "The Assassin's Gate," Tom Kicks's "Fiasco," and Lawrence Wright's "The Looming Tower," to name just a few?) Book review sections provide context to the news of the day, whether historical, cultural or fictional. They are the necessary shading that adds depth to a newspaper's coverage." *Rachel Hartigan Shea, Contributing Editor, Paperback Columnist, The Washington Post* --Marie Arana, Editor, Book World, The Washington Post.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:41:00 PM



6 COMMENTS:



Edward Champion said...

Who knew that book reviewing could be saved by fulminating flimsy generalizations and unnecessary invective towards online literary enthusiasts? That's the spirit, Dirda! If I ever run for political office, I will be sure to employ your sterling example. I will tell anyone who is even remotely passionate about politics that they are useless enfants terrible, while demanding their vote!

I'm all for saving book review sections. But can't we have a little bit of harmony here? At the end of the day, all of us, print and online, literary or "sub-literary," are champions of literature. This was one of the reasons I joined the NBCC, and I'm very disappointed to see these disparities vocalized. I'm almost positive that the current "NBCC-and-only-NBCC" posturing is wholly unintentional, but this ivory tower approach doesn't win anyone to the cause that ALL OF US are fighting for.

5:31 PM



Susan Helene Gottfried said...

Whoa. A number of my friends have book review blogs, and they are not there to catch attention through vulgarity and sass. They are there to share their thoughts on the books they read with others, and to begin a discussion about those books.

Jane, I invite you to e-mail me via my blog and I'll share those urls with you. Perhaps my friends can change your blanket statement and you can see, as I have grown to, the tool that a successful book blog can be.

7:07 PM



Darby M. Dixon III said...

I, also, fail to understand the logic behind Dirda's approach to convincing people that this cause is worthwhile. I think it runs something like this:

Francisco Chronicle
Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly
Frank Wilson, Book Editor, Philadelphia Inquirer
Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic, Entertainment Weekly
Carole Goldberg, Book Editor, Hartford Courant

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

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Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

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Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Develonina Characters*

1. A person likes books.
2. A person may wish to talk about books with other people who like books.
3. Blogs are a convenient method of communicating with other people whom one might not see in line during lunch in the office cafeteria.
4. ACK SNARL SPFLT GRZZZZ SPIT WHEEZE
5. People who blog about books are dumb and stuff, and are single-handedly responsible for the fact that my coffee tasted like bad cheese this morning.

(I think it's step four I'm having trouble decoding.)

9:09 PM



Anonymous said...

All right, people. Let's get serious about getting this here book section back. The people who made the decision to junk it - have they ever heard of ANY of the writers or editors or readers who signed the petition (unless Tom Clancy or Stephen King or Martha Stewart signed it after I last looked at it)? No. They may have seen Margaret Mitchell's house when they were driving past some bar, but do they know she worked for an Atlanta newspaper, like Erskine Caldwell? Doubtful. But what would work? One word. Harpo. Spelled backwards.

And how to bring that about? The way I see it - call a Knopf publicist and suggest somebody call Cormac. (Since Sonny signed this petition, seems feasible to me.) See if Cormac can call Oprah, and, if this proves workable, further suggest he suggest she call her good friend (and reader who suggested Heart Is A Lonely Hunter for the Book Club, AND GEORGIA NATIVE) Julia Roberts, and that they both ask the AJC to do a 180. Would the paper do it? I do think so - maybe in exchange for a stack of signed Pretty Women DVDs or somethin'.

11:21 PM



Joseph said...

I am skeptical about Ms. Arana's analysis of advertising for book sections. The question is not, Can you increase advertising revenue?--because of course you can. The proper question is, Can you increase advertising revenue profitably? This is doubtful. The huge circulation of newspapers make the ad rates very high. Why not advertise on Google without risk (pay per click) instead? Book reviews are likely to evolve into subscription-based products, with smaller circulations but dedicated readerships. The New York Review of Books is the model.

*12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel
Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*

*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's
Working On*

*Tom Bissell: What He's Working
On and What He's Reading*

*Jonathan Lethem: What He's
Working On*

*Ian McEwan on his Writing
Process*

Don DeLillo on Actors and Death

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching
Poetry*

Dave Eggers on Generosity

Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory

John Updike on Michiko Kakutani

*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike
and "Blood Meridian"*

Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"

*Andrew Sean Greer on "The
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier
and Clay"*

Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books

John Irving on John Irving

Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"

*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things
They Carried"*

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischek

Jason Berry Part I

Jason Berry Part II

Susan Larson

Jason Berry (Part I)

Jason Berry (Part II)

Brad Benischek

*Thinking About New Orleans: An
Update (6/04/07)*

James Lee Burke

Joseph J. Esposito

10:43 AM



Anonymous said...

I should explain why I suggested Cormac McCarthy. Besides being Oprah's author du jour, he started out as a midlist - indeed, a lowlist - writer, selling a few thousand copies of the three or four novels he wrote before Blood Meridian. One of the things that kept his career going were favorable notices from local reviewers writing for papers far from New York - and I suspect he hasn't forgotten that.

11:33 AM

POST A COMMENT

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[Writers, blogging](#)

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4/26/2007

Nadine Gordimer on the decline of Book Culture



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, discussion of book culture, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

Q: In America, readership levels are going down -- both of books and newspapers. Are you

having similar problems in South Africa?

A: I'm very troubled by what's happening to the book, that's why this event here, [the PEN festival](#) – seeing [large audiences turning up to hear writers](#) – is very heartening and encouraging. Because the image is gravely threatening the word. And the most obvious example and really important one is this: when you were a child, I'm sure somebody read to you a bedtime story. And from that comes your interest in words and wanting to read. You begin to associate the word that is read to you with what is there on the page. *In other words, you are beginning to read before you can read.* Nowadays, the child is put in front of the television: that is the bedtime story. But it's not the same as being read to, and that is why when children go to school they have problems. I know you have these problems in your own universities -- people go to college, and they have problems. And this is now becoming universal. In my country, in England, they are now having big problems.

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Marie Arana, Book Editor, The Washington Post, & C...

Andrei Codrescu: Newspapers Drop Book Pages

Q: The other aspect of this is the newspaper sections which cover books -- and bring that discussion to a wide and democratic audience -- are also shrinking.

A: Oh, yes, and the amount of journals where young people can see their first efforts, their first story or their first poem, are disappearing. All of us started that way -- we saw our first efforts published. Looking at it printed there, removed from yourself, you look at it objectively as a reader. It's your own work, but you look at it as a reader. And you see your shortcomings, and you see where you didn't quite convey what you wanted to. But now that chance is really gone. I was talking to somebody last night, he was saying the same thing about the literary reviews. Almost every college or university used to have a journal. Now there are few left. [Virginia Quarterly Review](#) is one of the few left. [Atlantic](#) has stopped publishing fiction...

Q: Once a year they have an issue...

A: Once a year!! [Atlantic](#) was a wonderful place for our stories. [Harper's](#) still publishes. And who else?

Q: Where were your very early stories published?

A: Outside South Africa. In [Kenyon Review](#) and [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), and very soon in the [New Yorker](#). And the [New Yorker](#) now -- one story. And very short. And more and more toward what they call personal history, which is autobiographical. The story is in trouble, and if the short story is in trouble, then so is the novel.

Q: What can be done?

A: In my country, the universities don't help, they say they are running out of money -- because the money has to put into 'formal education.' The idea that literature is not education is staggering.

Q: We are in a weird climate, aren't we? Where belief in the idea that literature improves your life, or at least enriches it, makes you sound old-fashioned.

A: But the fact is it helps you develop your *mysterious capacities* as human beings -- of thinking, doubting, making decisions, understanding your own emotions and those of others -- there isn't any other form that can do this.

**

Labels: [Author Interviews](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)



*NBCC Campaign to Save Book
Reviews Roundup*

*Susan Larson, New Orleans
Times-Picayune Book Edit...*

*Rick Moody: Speak Up in Defense
of Book Reviews*

*How to get Involved in Saving
Book Reviews*

Did you get the Memo?

*Stewart O'Nan on what Shrinking
Review Space Means...*

*David L. Ulin on the new Los
Angeles Times Book Re...*

*NBCC Campaign to Save Book
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*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

1 COMMENTS:

 [Sun Singer](#) said...

I'm not too old to remember the day when educated people felt that nothing prepared a student for a good life and a good job better than a liberal arts education. Then, even employers wanted people who were taught how to think.

Now we have more of a technical school approach within our colleges and universities. Since most businesses don't have a literature division, literature is more and more seen as irrelevant.

Short term, that blind approach appears to save money.

It is refreshing to read here in your post an enlightened point of view.

Malcolm

3:13 PM

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4/26/2007

AWP President Catherine Brady on the Value of Book Reviewers



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Catherine Brady is president of [AWP](#), the [Association of Writers and](#)

[Writing Programs](#), which supports more than 28,000 writers in more than 400 member colleges and universities and 95 writers; conferences and centers. She is the author of two short story collections and an assistant professor in the MFA in writing program at the University of San Francisco.

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The book reviewer is the matchmaker between writer and reader-- sometimes fussing about the writer/suitor's sloppy appearance; sometimes warning off the unsuspecting reader; sometimes cajoling reluctant lovers who approach the whole thing skeptically; and sometimes felicitously pairing two soul mates. For me, too many romances might never have been if not for a book review that tempted me to take a chance. As a reader, even more than as a writer, I'm compelled to campaign for newspapers and journals to continue publishing book reviews, and plenty of them.

This may seem like a request for charity: after all, people who run personal ads pay for them. If books can't hold their own against all the attractive alternatives—video games, the Internet, movies—why should any newspaper or journal assume a civic duty to continue publishing

[Scott McLemee](#)

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book reviews? In this culture we are inundated with information, delivered at an increasingly fragmented and indiscriminate pace: Britney Spears's trip to rehab vies with news from Iraq vies with a soldier's personal photos posted on the web on the day they were taken. We can find refuge from this breakneck assault in a medium that compacts what may be years of research and contemplation into portable form, one that offers insight at a pace we determine for ourselves. A reader, unlike a viewer, can pause to take in information, retrace her steps, participate in the evolution of the text. (Compare literature to other art forms and you'll see what I mean: no audience member at a concert or a dance performance is challenged to imaginatively contribute to the performance in the way that a reader of a good poem visualizes an image made with words, draws on his own life experience to decipher meaning, or alertly registers subtext.)

Plenty of alarming statistics document the decline of literacy in this country, offering plenty of reasons for the shrinking number of venues for book reviews. But those who decide the battle is already lost are guilty of a failure of faith and a failure of will. As a writer who teaches creative writing and literature, I can tell you that given the chance and even a little encouragement, people respond deliriously to good books. As president of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs, I can assure you that the book world's Lonely Hearts club is thriving, its members resolutely hopeful about every new prospect. To allude to mysterious market forces as a reason for not publishing book reviews sidesteps the fact that market forces most often result from human choice. We all need to promote books, and we need to promote reading not as a peripheral, arcane hobby of the privileged but as a functional and essential part of contemporary life. When a book reviewer brings a book out of lonely obscurity into public space, s/he makes a miracle possible. A book can dismantle any barrier between any two people. Any barrier—of class, culture, age, or life experience.--[Catherine Brady](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:05:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

 [CBE](#) said...

Count in me with your efforts! I blogged about this back at the beginning of March (<http://cbeblog.blogspot.com/2007/03/ill-take-my-coffee-black-and-with-good.html>), and I think that what's happening to book reviews is horrible, and unfortunately is much the fault of the publishers. Authors and publishers need book reviews, and we have to keep them around.

9:12 AM

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4/27/2007

A Book Editor Writes from Fly-Over America

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.



Resisting the urge to quote Eliot on April, I'm not ready to tear what's left of my hair out over the unpleasant, yet not unexpected book page news out of Atlanta, Los Angeles, Chicago and Raleigh.

First, all of us in the business have [a great deal of sympathy for Teresa Weaver](#) and other colleagues including several fine journalists at the Post-Gazette who've been the victim of the corporate chopping block.

But appealing to the better nature of the management and stockholders about the value of books and literary coverage in a petition campaign might make us feel good about ourselves, but isn't going to move that bottom line. It's not the desire that's missing; it's the money and the readers. Those factors aren't going to go away soon.

It's important to point out that newspapers have not really targeted book pages specifically, but the number of pages in all. Every section has taken a hit, except sports, of course. No comment here.

Newspapers have to deal with reality, as the hardy souls at the Los Angeles Times and Chicago Tribune tell us. Now on Sundays in Chicago, Tribune readers won't be distracted from the Nordstrom ads by book reviews. How nice for them. But Chicagoans will have a Saturday books section and that's still meaningful. Calling what happened to the Tribune company, a move that has been rumored for a year, is hardly a "seismic shift." Sometimes half a loaf is ...etc.

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These hard times must force newspapers and book editors to rethink what had become a predictable and conventional approach to books and reading. Although we of the literary school like to set ourselves above our more plebian counterparts in film, theater, TV and fine arts, the fact is that the quality of books has grown coarser and publishers are pandering more and more to cheap and easy payoffs. Two words: Judith Regan.

We in books can do little to stop the financial slide of our employers or alter the country's current cultural priorities, but clearly we have been failing to communicate effectively to our readers that literature, poetry and serious nonfiction matter and that they had goddamn well better care about it, OJ or no OJ.

We're not doing something right and I'm not sure how to fix it, but maintaining the status quo isn't the answer, as Mr. Andrei Codrescu, in his predictably cranky Mitteleuropa dismissal of American journalism took pains to point out.

I live in a part of the country where deaths outnumber births and where the percentage of population loss is second to New Orleans in the 21st century – without Katrina. Yet, the cultural scene continues to be amazing and diverse, especially in new fiction and the solid Old Guard of poetry. I'm out night after night reviewing readings in the back rooms of bars, gay coffeehouses, a converted slaughterhouse and a 3,000-seat auditorium filled for David Sedaris. Literary coverage appears in the Post-Gazette most days of the week, not just on Sunday.

In that way, the Post-Gazette engages the city's writers, poets and editors and makes them feel they don't work in the dark, that the paper cares about their efforts and will give them a forum to be heard.

Until I get a New York Times Book Review budget, that's the best I can do, plus guarantee that what I believe are the important books are reviewed. I'm passing on the formulaic titles of the Graftons, Cornwalls and James Lee Burkes and many others these days in favor of a mix of worthy fiction, poetry (no more Billy Collins, either) and topical nonfiction.

It's good to have this conversation. I've made the editors here – most of whom write book reviews – aware of the NBCC campaign and will move to open a discussion in the PG newsroom for more ideas. I'll be sure to pass them along.

Bob Hoover

Book editor, the [Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)

Labels: [Criticism](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

Marie Arana, Book Editor, The Washington Post, & C...

Andrei Codrescu: Newspapers Drop Book Pages

NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews Roundup

Susan Larson, New Orleans Times-Picayune Book Edit...

Rick Moody: Speak Up in Defense of Book Reviews

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[*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey*](#)

[*To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book*](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 9:13:00 AM



3 COMMENTS:

 [maryalicegorman](#) said...

For my money, the P-G could dump the Munch blather.....and run one book review in it's space in the Magazine.

That said, the whole competition for eyeballs that the internet has ushered in to our lives will have many more casualties in print before it's over.

Popular fiction still rules in our house. Hang in there!

Mary Alice

7:36 PM

 Nancy said...

Perhaps your decision to pass on popular fiction needs to be reviewed. Those of us who write it have cottoned on to the obvious: Readers plunk their money down for a product they enjoy.

Also, a book page that is so relentlessly pessimistic eventually becomes too depressing to read.

8:46 PM

 [David J. Montgomery](#) said...

I wonder about the value to readers of a book section that dismisses popular fiction. (Perhaps I'm misunderstanding?) Surely one of the missions of solid review coverage should be to at least occasionally write about the books that people are interested in reading.

4:15 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

[John Freeman: Steal From the Blogs; Blogs Are "Presorted"](#)

[Bob Hoover on book sections](#)

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4/27/2007

Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen Differs from The Book



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Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

As a writer, I care passionately about discussions about books. I care passionately about books themselves, and what they mean in our cultural history. Shall we remind ourselves of the uproar over the Gutenberg Bible? Moveable type made words – and ideas – available to everyone, and it changed the world. We were lucky it did. Who would we be, if we hadn't read the Bible, and "Hamlet," and "Anna Karenina," and "A Hundred Years of Solitude"?

Right now, we're seeing a huge struggle over another enormous technological shift, this one between the word on paper and whatever the flat screen has to offer. I have nothing against the flat screen: I'm writing this on a flat screen, and for a flat screen. But the flat screen is different from the book. Flat screen engagement is, by its nature--all those different screens and windows, links and hyperlinks and clicks and underlines and vanishing text--temporary, public and syncopated. When you're on the internet, there is always someone watching you. It's always active, always changing, whether you're on it or not. Getting

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onto the internet is like getting onto a ski lift--it's already moving. You climb on when you're ready, but it won't stop for you. It's run by something else, some large, impersonal force.

This kind of interaction is very different from what happens when you read a book. That is something deep and silent, personal and interior. When you reading a book you offer it your full attention. No one is listening. You are running this show. When you put the book down, nothing will happen until you pick it up again. You become engaged by its intellectual and emotional presence, you enter into the quiet private world it offers. This is very different from viewing of a screen. It doesn't happen through internet chitchat or movie watching. (I don't mean to disparage either the internet or the movies, both of which I enjoy--but there's a difference between watching them and reading books. Anyone who has tried to read "Anna Karenina" on a laptop knows what I mean.)

Since I am so passionate about books, when I see that reviews of them are being cut from newspapers across the country, I'm frightened. I don't know what will happen to a society that gives so little respect to intellectual engagement.

I can see, of course, that finances and practicality play a part here. Newspaper owners are experiencing frightening losses of revenue and of readership-- but the people who read the newspaper are a self-selected audience. It is made up of people who have, for this particular encounter, chosen the printed word over the screen. If this is an audience who has chosen the printed word, why imitate the screen? Why alienate those people who want to read print, by refusing to acknowledge what the printed word has to offer?

People who read newspapers read books. If newspapers need to cut something, why not cut the things that are readily available on the flat screen? Please, please, please, give the readers of the printed word some printed words about reading.--[Roxana Robinson](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:51:00 AM



7 COMMENTS:

[Edward Champion](#) said...

People who read on screens print things off. Particularly long pieces. (Although I agree that a screen is not a way to read a novel.) Harper's understands this, which is why they've made their archive available in printed form to subscribers. PW announced this morning that they would be doing something

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*Marie Arana, Book Editor, The
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similar.

People who read on screens have a variety of ways to read their content, thanks to RSS feeds.

People who participate in online communities can now exchange their thoughts directly with the author, and authors and readers can learn from each other.

"When you're on the Internet, there is always someone watching you."

Yeah, I wish that dirty man in the trenchcoat sitting across the cafe would stop staring at me too.

All this is not to say that book reviewing is not worth saving, but it is to suggest that embracing the convergence, while also fighting for book review coverage, is the answer. The Internet may be confusing to some people, like Ms. Robinson, but then so have previous forms of technology. Thankfully, there are many kind and helpful people who will help you out. And some of them even live in "fly-over territory."

2:42 PM

 Darby M. Dixon III said...

This is good stuff.

3:04 PM

 Sonia said...

I would like to point out, after having been forwarded an e-mail about the petition to the Atlanta publication, that it asks potential signers to lie if they aren't readers of this paper but still wish to support this cause.

11:48 PM

 eric weinberger said...

Yes, that's the reason I haven't signed the petition. I'm sure the fault is all mine, but I've never read the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

11:38 AM

 Gerard Jones said...

Book review boys and girls are getting all het up about newspapers getting rid of book reviews, calling it the new book burning. Ha! It's book review boys and girls themselves who are burning books by choosing to review only those books that suck up to the corporate goons who decide what brave, free Americans are allowed to read and what they're not allowed to read. Brave, free Americans are allowed to read nothing but moneygrubbing drivel that supports, protects and defends the ghoulish notion of making money at all costs. If a book is

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San

reviewed by a bona fide book critic, that book was published by a big publisher for the sole purpose of making money and is therefore by definition not worth reading, writing, reviewing or publishing. Show me a single exception to that rule and I'll eat it. Book review boys and girls victims of their own hype, that's all. Why I even bother to dick with 'em, I do not know. G.

11:47 AM

 Martha O'Connor said...

>it asks potential signers to lie if they aren't readers of this paper but still wish to support this cause.

The email I received about the petition, which I gladly signed, said nothing of the sort.

1:15 PM

 emlak said...

thak you very nice topic, thankss ;)

3:30 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

[The Lit-Crit Career: It's All About The Socioeconomics Does Anyone Else Understand This?](#)

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4/28/2007

"Save the Book Review" READ-IN outside the AJC



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which

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Mary Ann Gwinn

James Marcus

Maureen McLane

features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

WHAT: ATLANTA Save the Book Review READ-IN! Bring a book (or many books!) you love, and let's create a critical mass of readers to put the pressure on the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to reverse its terrible decision to "reorganize" its book review out of existence! [They got rid of the book review editor](#), and without an official champion for books within the paper, the quality of books coverage is endangered! It will become disorganized and sporadic, if not simply perfunctory, until, worse, it's no longer there.

TIME: 10:00 AM until...you decide!

DATE: THURSDAY, MAY 3, 2007 *rain or shine

LOCATION: Converge in front of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution at 72 Marietta Street. Hold open your book and read aloud or to yourself. Trust me, you won't be the only one. Picture hundreds of people doing the same thing! [*directions below]

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

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Recent Posts

*Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen
Differs from The Book...*

*A Book Editor Writes from Fly-
Over America*

WHO: Open to any and all readers and lovers of books, newspapers and literary discussion. Come one, come all Atlantans (or ATLiens), Georgians, and maybe even some of you hardcore out-of-staters. The NBCC will be there.

WHY: Because the city of Atlanta wants a robust, reader-friendly, intelligent book review, not just a section run on auto-pilot from above. Teresa Weaver has created and run exactly this kind of section for almost ten years now and we want the AJC to reward her expertise, not eliminate her job. Again, if you haven't signed the 'Protect Atlanta's Book Review ' petition yet, here's the link to it: '[Protect Atlanta's Book Review ' Review '](#)

DIRECTIONS: MARTA: The MARTA stop is Five Points. Exit onto Marietta St., the AJC building is less than two blocks west (left). For an online Citysearch map, look [here](#). Driving directions to come.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 5:16:00 PM



0 COMMENTS:

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4/29/2007

Michael Connelly Defends the Book Review

*The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of *the campaign's blog series*, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.*



In a rousing editorial in the [Los Angeles Times](#) this weekend, Michael Connelly wrote about the folly of downsizing book reviews. He made two points which haven't been aired as much, but which feel essential in this debate.

The first is that book review sections can help bring beginning writers

attention and readers:

"[An early review in the Washington Post Book World] and others like it stimulated interest in what I had to say. They got the momentum going in the bookstores. Those reviews helped establish the voice of the protagonist, Los Angeles Police Department Det. Harry Bosch, and now, 12 books later, Bosch has led a full and adventurous (albeit tortured) life in Los Angeles. He has explored places and seen things in this city that most people who live here don't even know about. All the while he has tried to understand and make sense of his city and his place in it — just like everybody else who lives here.

I can't help but wonder, though, how long Harry would have lasted had he been born in today's newspaper environment. Across the country,

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[Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen Differs from The Book](#)

papers are cutting back on the space, attention and care they devote to books. Recently, for instance, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution announced that the position of book editor would be eliminated in a cost-cutting move. Without a specific editor directing book coverage, the paper will rely more heavily on reviews from wire services."

THE OTHER TERRIFIC POINT Connelly makes is that book reviews encourage the very activity newspapers need customers to do in order for their business to stay viable -- READING.

"The truth is that the book and newspaper businesses share the same dreadful fear: that people will stop reading. And the fear may be well-founded. Across the country, newspaper circulations are down — and this is clearly part of the reason for the cuts to book sections. At the same time, the book business increasingly relies on an aging customer base that may not be refueling itself with enough new readers.

In the past, newspaper executives understood the symbiotic relationship between their product and books. People who read books also read newspapers. From that basic tenet came a philosophy: If you foster books, you foster reading. If you foster reading, you foster newspapers. That loss-leader ends up helping you build and keep your base.

What I fear is that this philosophy is disappearing from the boardrooms of our newspapers; that efforts to cut costs now will damage both books and newspapers in the future. Short-term gains will become long-term losses."

**

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 3:26:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

 [Sarah Weinman](#) said...

Connelly does indeed have a lot of great points, but I'd add that a lot of the success of THE BLACK ECHO had less to do with print reviews than a) the championing of Harry Bosch on the part of many independent mystery bookstores b) word of mouth among fans that spread further and wider with the publication of each Bosch book, which then spurred sales of the backlist, etc etc.

Where book reviews helped Connelly, more likely, is in establishing his critical credentials not only within the mystery community, but outside it. As in, for those whose crime fiction readings tended to focus on Hammett and Chandler and no one

Dijfers from The Book...
*A Book Editor Writes from Fly-
Over America*
*AWP President Catherine Brady on
the Value of Book...*
*Nadine Gordimer on the decline of
Book Culture*
*Marie Arana, Book Editor, The
Washington Post, & C...*
*Andrei Codrescu: Newspapers
Drop Book Pages*
*NBCC Campaign to Save Book
Reviews Roundup*
*Susan Larson, New Orleans
Times-Picayune Book Edit...*

Past Posts Of Note

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Rules, which he admits
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routine, and feeling glum about
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them?*
*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies*
*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*
*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*
*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*
*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

else, now they had a more contemporary crime writer to shower hosannas on.

As for Connelly's point about if he had been starting out writing Harry Bosch today instead of the early 90s, that question can be answered somewhat easily. There would be reviews by those remaining mystery-oriented critics (several of whom, like myself, are members of the NBCC) a slew of online reviews, chatter and word of mouth, championing on the part of indie mystery bookstores, and for those lucky chosen few, co-op at the front of the chain stores and wholesale outlets. Which is to say, there wouldn't be all that much difference, even with the changes that have ensued over these 15 years. (For more recent examples of such: Lee Child and Laura Lippman, both starting in 1997; Barry Eisler, starting in 2001; Michael Koryta, 2003; and I suspect there will be yet more examples coming out of 2007's class.)

9:38 PM

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4/29/2007

NBCC Campaign: The Blogosphere Reponds

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

It's now been over a week since the NBCC campaign has launched, and there's been time for tons of reaction to the NBCC campaign, Teresa Weaver's firing and the dissolution of book review sections in general to gather over the blogosphere--some pro, some con, some hmmm. For those of you that don't have time to hang out on Technorati, we've rounded up a bunch of reactions. Please feel free to join in the debate and add your thoughts below.

The [blog](#) of Atlanta's [Guernica magazine](#) isn't sure the campaign can overcome [the AJC's love](#) for disco babes, Rue McLanahan.

Sun Singer in Atlanta signed the petition, saying ['it's free, it's painless, and no salesman will call.'](#)

A weary Baby Got Books says, "If they shut them all down, come [here](#)."

C. Max Magee at The Millions has a [cogent analysis](#) of the business of books sections that asks, when the whole newspaper industry model is broken, why wouldn't the reviews sections be too?

Former NBCC board member [J. Peder Zane](#) has been watching [this trend from a long ways away](#) and will have more to say on it soon.

Amidst many other interesting points, the dubious BookBlog.net says if readers are worried about declining book coverage, they [should protest with their dollars](#), not make a "meaningless, albeit virtuous" gesture by signing a petition.

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[Michael Connelly Defends the Book Review](#)

[Four Visions of Yasmina Khadra](#)

["Save the Book Review" READ-IN](#)

The *Seattle PI's* books blog thinks it's not about saving books sections, it's about [reinventing them](#).

NBCC member and [Galleycat](#) Editor Sarah Weinman says reviewers should [stop](#) "depending on third parties to decide our critical fates" and instead "make literary criticism matter directly to the readers - no matter where the source."

Steven Hart says [it should be obvious to newspapers that encouraging reading, in whatever form, is in their best interest](#).

Charlottesville Word, responding to a [contentious post](#) in the NBCC series, tells Michael Dirda if he doesn't like literary bloggers, he doesn't have to read the [Internets](#).

Moreover [asks](#) is people really *do* want to read more about books--then points to an New Republic [debate](#) over whether we need a new American book review (subscription req'd).

Imani would sob over the decline of literary magazines, but she's [not sure](#) if blogs don't already have her covered better than newspapers for book reviews.

Someone in the Netherlands has [thoughts](#). Calling a member-translator, please... though we're pretty sure we've got the "boek" thing.

NBCC member fade theory (a.k.a. Rachel J.K. Grace) thinks print media [loses out to blogs](#) since readers don't have an online forum to react and interact.

Did we miss a good link? Tell us in the comments.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY LIZZIE SKURNICK 8:44:00 PM  

6 COMMENTS:

 [Edward Champion](#) said...

Who knew that the blogosphere was capable of submerging once again into the great pond? :)

12:27 AM

 [Leora Skolkin-Smith](#) said...

I wanted to respond, as an author, to the idea that blogs and blogwriters have somehow missed the value of the "Written" word because they are using electronic screens rather than paper. I disagree completely with this. For me, it's the bloggers

outside the AJC

*Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen
Differs from The Book...*

*A Book Editor Writes from Fly-
Over America*

*AWP President Catherine Brady on
the Value of Book...*

*Nadine Gordimer on the decline of
Book Culture*

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Washington Post, & C...*

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George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30
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Roundup*

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Novel and who's trying to ban
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
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*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

who have held the written word up and restored it to the cherishable and literary value it deserves in our commercially drenched culture. Writers who aren't "famous" and who do have thousands of dollars to pay for commercially driven publicity campaigns no longer have to rely on the sensibilities and selective tastes of a few "newspaper" critics and feel that humiliation--that is, that their prose is merely adding to some endless pile regarded by newspaper critics as slush. Rather than feeling that writing is all about selling and pleasing a handful of reviewers, being regarded as just another irritant amidst stacks and stacks and stacks, it is the bloggers,--in my opinion that have returned literature to a dialogue and rejected the celebritization of literature. Using a flat screen does not mean dishonoring the written word. Just the opposite. It's still words, it's still language, and important it's thought, passion and dialogue.

As a link I would like to point to the most excellent British website www.readysteady.com which I wish we had more of in the States and also to hardworking and usually unpaid bloggers (who I can't name for fear I will leave some deserving one out--) I have never seen words more valued, the playing field finally levelled and not left to a handful of positioned critics deciding which book to review.

I want there to be newspaper reviews, also, for there to be much more space for book reviews in papers, but I do not understand this criticism of bloggers and see no way it makes sense to devalue blog or websites. And it has become so common (and painful), I needed to speak up.

9:01 AM

 Eric said...

There's also my comments about certain reactionary comments in the NBCC campaign here:

<http://www.wetasphalt.com/?q=node/158>

10:32 AM

 Leora Skolkin-Smith said...

"Writers who aren't "famous" and who do (NOT) have thousands of dollars to pay for commercially driven publicity campaigns no longer have to rely on the sensibilities and selective tastes of a few "newspaper" critics and feel that humiliation--"

SORRY. I MEANT WRITERS WHO DO NOT HAVE THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS. I DIDN'T MEAN WRITERS WHO DO HAVE THE MONEY. The distinction was important enough for me to correct my sloppy copy-editing.

10:59 AM

 DJ Cayenne said...

The Wordsmiths' Books blog has been leading the local charge:

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San

<http://blog.wordsmithsbooks.com/?p=103>

There is a "read in" planned at the AJC building on Thursday at 11 AM. If you're anywhere nearby, bring a book and join us.

12:13 PM



Martha Southgate said...

Tayari Jones, a fine African-American writer and an Atlanta native has done a couple of good pieces about this on her blog at www.tayarijones.com

It would be particularly good to link to her or approach her about putting her post on your site as she has a substantial African-American readership and Atlanta is a substantially African-American town. Like a lot of things in literary culture, this fight is seeming a little bit segregated (not intentionally, I'm sure--it never is). Anyway, check out Tayari, she's doing good work. And I'm putting the button on my website--
www.marthasouthgate.com

Thanks for keeping up the fight.

9:54 AM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

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[The Lit-Crit Career: It's All About The Socioeconomics](#)

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[Short Takes](#)

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3801. -Tiffany A. Coleman -- Why are the ad inserts in the AJC getting thicker and thicker. Don't get me wrong. I love myself some coupons, but c'mon. You're getting rid of a very important position at the paper-- book review editor. Why can't the AJC appeal to the same businesses and corporations who are filling the Sunday paper with this increasing amount of advertisements--Target, HHGregg, Walgreens, CVS, Publix, Kroger, Auto ads (pick a company), and too many to list, to put their ad dollars to better use by helping to create a bigger and better book review sections at the AJC? And the onus is not just on these companies, I know. It's just an idea, especially in a time when we should think about recycling all of those advertising inserts. Most people throw them out. Build a better book review and they will come. Don't sell out. Is this your AJC or MY AJC? Can readers have a say, or is it just whoever can write you the biggest check who has a say?

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 9:00:00 AM



3 COMMENTS:

e King said...

"--voice for the literary world--"

"--including my book--"

The perspective you're giving to the newspaper is not that of newspaper readers, but those affected by the changes. It's a losing argument.

Telling is the smarmy remark about sports scores.

The question you should be asking:

"What are the sports pages giving readers, which the books sections are not?"

(The fact that you've refused to post my disagreeing posts before illustrates the problem. Your organization is hostile to conflict, competition, contending ideas, to real criticism of "managers" of the art-- exactly what readers get from the sports pages, multiplied.)

11:18 AM

e John Freeman said...

We do not censor comments and are not hostile to debate -- just look at the blog. The only comments we reject are abusive ones. For the record: Neither Rebecca Skloot or I have never deleted a comment by King (in fact, we've posted his comments here in the past though they were fairly hostile).

12:53 PM

e King said...

Quite a mystery. SOMEONE deleted them. (Or rather, failed to

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outside the AJC
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in Books
The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey
Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey
To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book

Quite a mystery. SOMEONE deleted them. (Or rather, failed to post them.) You might want to review your blog's e-mails. Anyway, nice to see I finally got a reaction from someone. Debate? Where? There are hundreds of reviewers reading this blog and scarcely a murmur of disagreement to be found anywhere-- a mirror of the literary world itself the past fifteen years. (Yes, changing with the rise of blogs.) I don't think you realize the struggle of writers outside the system to get even the most minimal hearing by established literary culture. It's taken noise-making, stunts, and continual lobbying. This will continue. My group was founded by readers who wish to revive and save the art. Your crowd has had control of it for decades and have to show for it only failure, as literature's position and role in the culture has steadily dwindled. Drastic action is needed. I hope there's something there you can agree with. Thank you for posting this.

2:21 PM

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CRITICAL MASS

the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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www.bookcritics.org/blog

4/30/2007

Strength in Numbers -- starting with 365

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

THE NBCC's campaign to save book reviews took up so much time last week, we missed an opportunity to briefly celebrate this blog's first birthday. Just over a year ago we began, tripping, stumbling over ourselves, trying to squeeze the fox you see to the left into the frame. It was a bit ham-fisted at first -- and we got better as Rebecca Skloot and now also Lizzie Skurnick have steered us toward the light -- but it was in service of bigger goals. We wanted to continue the literary discussion we had in our deliberations online with a wider circle of people. We also hoped to make our awards more transparent without betraying the confidentiality necessary to picking our winners.

But now we've arrived at the blog's most powerful *raison d'etre* -- and the reason we're taking a momentary break from regular talk about actual books -- this [campaign to save book reviews](#). At first glance it would seem there's an inherent contradiction in the structure of this cause: a group of mostly print journalists using the web to preserve print space. Especially if you believe in the generalizations out there that a blog is merely a vehicle for literary gossip and aspirational writing composed by angry young men mingling away in their pajamas -- and a print book review is a piece of dying or dead old media written by tweed-wearing codgers with names like F.D. Rumplemeyer or J.R. Woatslittie who watch no television and enjoy their Wheatabix.

But as anyone who reads the book pages and blogs in this country knows these generalizations aren't useful at all. There are [tweedy old codgers who blog](#) and [tweedy young reviewers who don't](#). Some of the best book blogs are [run like a book review](#) -- with assignments [farmed out and \(obviously\) edited](#), [interviews](#) done, -- while some literary

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[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

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[Full blogger bios available here](#)

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All reader comments on this site are moderated: We welcome all civil commentary. Any comments that are inflammatory, mean spirited, spam or otherwise inappropriate will not be posted. We also discourage anonymous commenting.

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reviews don't seem to do much editing at all. The great thing about the web is you can sample all of them without running down to a research library to fish them out of the circulating stacks.

These generalizations are especially damaging because it gets in the way of an important truth --we're all pitching in to the same conversation. Whether it's on screen or in print, on a podcast or through the tabloid your subway seatmate has open on her lap next to you, this swirl of debate and opinion, cant and artful critique is all part of the same froth about books. It's how our culture thinks about itself, displays and digests its wisdom, gives a platform to intelligent (we hope) voices, and sifts signal from noise. Which is why the NBCC is prepared to fight for it -- smart, informed, well-crafted criticism is essential to our culture, to our democracy and to the improvement of our arts.

Some comments on the blog have suggested we believe print reviews to be the only venue for doing this, or that we want to save criticism by trashing blogs, or that we believe the NBCC and the NBCC alone can save reviews. That's not the case at all -- we wouldn't be staging this campaign from a blog, across the web, linking to bloggers and asking other bloggers to contribute posts if we didn't believe in the medium's capacity to bring intelligent debate to books. Nor do we believe that print reviews have a monopoly on good writing or contextualizing. Anyone who has taken a spin around the web realizes there is one [site](#), after [another](#), after [another](#), after [another](#) and [another](#) which adds daily to our understanding of how literature is being written today.

But right now the fight that needs fighting is not for blogs (which are doing just fine), but print pages. In one year this blog earned us about a half-a-million readers -- an impressive number, perhaps, until you realize that's about how many people read the San Francisco Chronicle Book Review gets on any given Sunday according to their readership surveys. None of those people have to own a computer, go to the library, or turn on a single piece of equipment. They just have to open the front door and pick up the paper without their bathrobe flapping open.

In spite of the Chronicle Book Review's popularity, though, it was cut in half -- the first in what has become a waterfall of cuts recently, from the Tribune papers to the AJC, on down the line, with more looming further upstream. There are financial and media reasons for these cuts, sure. We realize the newspaper model is changing -- that the future of media is a combination of print and online venues -- that's pretty much for certain. Even Newsweek is banking on it.

But until we're all reading book reviews set to streaming video played from a dangling monocle, the print book review -- which is what we're talking about here -- is an essential bridge from writers to readers. It

Review

[Four Visions of Yasmina Khadra](#)

["Save the Book Review" READ-IN outside the AJC](#)

[Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen Differs from The Book...](#)

[A Book Editor Writes from Fly-Over America](#)

[AWP President Catherine Brady on the Value of Book...](#)

[Nadine Gordimer on the decline of Book Culture](#)

[Marie Arana, Book Editor, The Washington Post, & C...](#)

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[Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future](#)

[The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing](#)

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reaches people who didn't go seeking it, it reaches them cheaply, it fosters reading in general, and by and large, with some exceptions, it reaches readers with a certain degree of elegance and intelligence. It is in the preservation of that resource that we are fighting now -- and we're asking everyone who cares about it to join us. Even those of you -- print journalists or bloggers -- who write in your [fierce pajamas](#).

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 12:31:00 PM



14 COMMENTS:



Anonymous said...

Not so much a comment as a question. Specifically in regards to the statement: "Some comments on the blog have suggested we believe print reviews to be the only venue for doing this, or that we want to save criticism by trashing blogs, or that we believe the NBCC and the NBCC alone can save reviews."

By "Some comments", do you mean some responders to posts, in the comments section? Or are you acknowledging that some comments within the posts (use Dirda's generalization "not merely as opportunities for shallow grandstanding and overblown ranting, all too often by kids hoping to be noticed for their sass and vulgarity. Should we allow our culture to descend to this playground level of discourse?" for example) have given this impression?

In general, I'm glad to read this particular post by you, Mr. Freeman. I just hope that the response to my question is the latter.

Signing off below as anonymous, though this is from Dan Wickett - I'm not simply looking for a quick link to my own site from this, a blog with a much larger readership than my own.

10:15 AM



Vikram Johri said...

Many Happy Returns! Nothing, to my mind, can be a better gift to Critical Mass than a sustained effort at voicing protests against the declining status of book review sections.

10:20 AM



Imani said...

I'm happy to read this as well, not so much because I thought blogs were being "excluded" from the conversation--you're quite right to point out that you're interested in saving print at

'06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

present--but because I thought a few of your contributors were trashing the opportunities of the internet in a desperate attempt to elevate the printed enclave.

It was very boring and wearying to see yet another false dichotomy of the evil! ephemeral! quick! vulgar! internet set up against the patient. reflective. mature. modest. printed page. I think that the average person, certainly the likeliest candidate to hear about this campaign *on your blog*, is going to be someone who has a happy mix of both in their world.

I don't see how anyone can expect the book section in newspapers to survive without their vision including an imaginative integration with the internet and what it has to offer. (I don't mean offering a few free articles either.) This won't get done if one's mind is stuck with a paradigm that would only appeal to my grandparents (bless them).

1:29 PM



Edward Champion said...

Let me also chime in and say that this is a step in the right direction, and that I hope this represents a future approach of unity and reconciliation for the more common goal of literary coverage in as many conduits as possible. False Manichean dichotomies such as print vs. online, flyover vs. bicoastal, n+1 vs. litblogs, John Freeman vs. Edward Champion, and the like aren't going to get us anywhere. The door on this end remains open, Mr. Freeman, for further discussion on how we can come together.

2:16 PM



Anonymous said...

Ed- We're all glad that your "door remains open," but don't pretend anyone else is obligated to walk through it.

I don't think that anyone besides you is troubling over a Manichean "Freeman v. Champion" dichotomy. What is with your habit of making any print v. online issue about yourself? Why does a debate about the quality of the NYTBR become a snarky game about sending brownies to Sam Tanenhaus? Why does the NBCC's efforts to save space for literary coverage in print media have to become about whether John Freeman is responding to your emails? It's so tiresome.

3:58 PM



Rebecca Skloot said...

Clearly, some posts here (like Dirda's) have been critical of litblogs. But that doesn't mean the NBCC is critical of lit blogs (or shares Dirda's opinions about them). As always: items on this blog represent individual posters' *personal* opinions, not some collective opinion of all bloggers here, or of the NBCC as a whole.

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing

Editor, Publishers Weekly

Frank Wilson, Book Editor,

Philadelphia Inquirer

Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,

Entertainment Weekly

Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,

Hartford Courant

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

Convergences With NBCC Winner

Lawrence Weschler

A Conversation With NBCC

Winner Julie Phillips

A Conversation With Barbara J.

King

Talking With Chimanda Adichie

Moshin Hamid on Camus,

Immigration, and Love

An Interview With Melissa Fay

Green

Wole Soyinka on Becoming an

Activist

Dick Adler on the Best Books of

2006

Richard Powers

Simon Prosser on What People are

Talking About in London

Robley Wilson on What He's

Reading

Elizabeth Evans on What She's

Reading

T. Christian Miller On War

Profiteering, part 1 and part 2

Q & A with Kiran Desai

Eliot Weinberger on Eating

Intestines in China

William T. Vollmann on Doing

Drugs as Research

Caroline Moorehead on Martha

Gellhorn

Kiran Desai on Home and

Different Cultures and

Developing Characters

12 Questions for Chimamanda

I've been silent on this campaign so far, but here's my take: I love lit blogs and have absolutely nothing negative to say about them (I created *Critical Mass* because I think lit blogs are now a hugely important part of the literary and publishing world). As both an author and a critic, I'm relieved to see that web book coverage seems to be growing, not shrinking like its print counterpart. I think that, in many ways, the internet has played (and will continue to play) a key role in keeping book culture and coverage alive. I also think it's important to save as many print outlets as possible.

I've spent a lot of time in rural Appalachia and many other places where locals line up at the library for their hour on one of three or four town computers because they don't have internet access at home. Plenty of readers (or potential readers) in this country don't read lit blogs because of minimal computer access, lack of internet savvy, or who-knows-what-else ... I'd hate to see them cut out of the conversation about books simply because they can't or don't or won't get their book news online.

The way I see it, this isn't an online vs. print issue at all. It's about online helping to save print. It's about people who love books coming together (online and off) to help save them and give them the widest audience possible.

4:56 PM



[edward champion](#) said...

Thanks for the comment, Rebecca. But I should point out that I'm not suggesting that litblogs should be inured from criticism (far from it), but rather that blanket generalizations, such as Mr. Dirda's remarks and some of Mr. Freeman's (which both gentlemen have now atoned for), don't help anyone in this discussion. Healthy and constructive introspection, which involves scrutinizing why book review sections are losing readers by pointing to possible fallacies of the form (which I have NOT seen in these "discussions"), might help us all figure out what both print and online conduits are doing right and wrong. As Pat Holt suggested the other day, the book review format hasn't changed much in 25 years, while the publishing environment has. All I'm calling for is a little more flexibility, inclusiveness, and contemplation of the gray areas in a very complicated issue.

As for Anonymous, a person who clearly displays his/her courage and fortitude by refusing to sign his/her name (is some mysterious president pulling a sprezzatura?), I realize that some editors are "under no obligation to acknowledge the brownie." I'll let the fact that certain people remain humorless about literature stand for itself, although I happily keep the door open for anyone, including Mr. Tanenhaus. It's only about me in so far as I'm simply attempting to communicate between print and online conduits, so that the two sides will better understand each other and so that the inclusiveness championed in this post

Adichie

5 Questions for Amy Helpel

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*

*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's
Working On*

*Tom Bissell: What He's Working
On and What He's Reading*

*Jonathan Lethem: What He's
Working On*

*Ian McEwan on his Writing
Process*

Don DeLillo on Actors and Death

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching
Poetry*

Dave Eggers on Generosity

Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory

John Updike on Michiko Kakutani

*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike
and "Blood Meridian"*

Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"

*Andrew Sean Greer on "The
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier
and Clay"*

Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books

John Irving on John Irving

Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"

*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things
They Carried"*

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischek

Jason Berry Part I

Jason Berry Part II

Susan Larson

Jason Berry (Part I)

Jason Berry (Part II)

Brad Benischek

*Thinking About New Orleans: An
Update (6/04/07)*

James Lee Burke

Ken Foster

might be better effected. It may also be about me because I am
am unafraid of signing my name to any bold statement.

5:18 PM

 Anonymous said...

It's true, Rebecca, that because a few comments sprinkled
through various posts make generalized statements that seem
negative towards litbloggers certainly does not mean that the
NBCC as a whole feels this way. Though, I do have to say the
fact that some of those comments, be they here, or stated
elsewhere, came from the NBCC President himself did make it
easier to fall into the trap of believing so.

It took me the bulk of this week to read everything close enough
to realize that I was allowing a minor issue, within the major
issue, to keep me from acting upon the major issue.

Was I being too defensive over simple statements about
litbloggers because I am one? Probably. I'm not an active print
reviewer - had two show up in a small paper in Madison, WI a
few years back and haven't even thought of submitting elsewhere
since - but do spend time every Sunday a.m. looking at the Free
Press section here in Detroit (well, page really, not section), and
realize that not everybody has computers, or is even interested in
using computers to travel the country's book pages every Sunday
morning, as I do.

I agree that saving Print Review coverage is extremely important
and hope to somehow help.

Dan Wickett

5:41 PM

 Anonymous said...

Also, sorry for the multi-posting, I have come to the conclusion
that I don't really believe that the majority of the comments
were made to really slam litblogs, so much as attempt to point
out that the discussion is/was really meant to hinge on print
reviews.

So, while some of John Freeman's comments, or that by Mr.
Dirda, originally struck me as slaps, I do believe they were really
trying to point the conversation towards print reviewing, and not
slam litblogging/online reviewing.

DW

5:55 PM

 Rebecca Skloot said...

I absolutely agree, Ed, comments should always be bylined. But I
must say, for the record, Freeman did not write that anonymous
one above. How I know: First, because that comment came from

Louisiana in Words

Joshua Clark

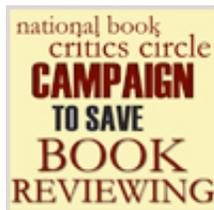
Julie Smith

Andrei Codrescu

Blake Bailey

Tom Piazza

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go=saveBookReviews"  
><img
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February 2008

March 2008

an IP address that's nowhere near Freeman's. And second, he'd never use the word [Manichean](#).

5:56 PM

 [Rebecca Skloot](#) said...

And thanks, Dan, for your follow up comments, and for reading the blog so closely.

6:19 PM

 [Edward Champion](#) said...

Good point, Rebecca. :) Thanks.

6:35 PM

 [J. Peder Zane](#) said...

As a former board member of the NBCC I can say that your work — especially John's and Rebecca's — is the best thing that has happened to book culture in a good while.

The extraordinary amounts of time you volunteers devote to this essential labor of love is staggering. More than keeping me informed, you inspire me to try harder.

Thank you,

J. Peder Zane

3:43 PM

 [Leora Skolkin-Smith](#) said...

Wonderful post. Very true and quite moving.

Thanks for saying things I feel and think but haven't found the right words for!

11:34 AM

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4/30/2007

Richard Ford on the Folly of Removing Teresa Weaver



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-

eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections matter.

Q: You signed the recent petition [to protect Atlanta's book review](#). Do you have any thoughts on this trend of newspapers cutting back their book sections?

A: I think that rapacity and the urge to silence the national discourse about American culture has been dear to the heart of the Hearsts and the McCormicks. So that it should bubble up again in the heart of the nouveau riche people who run the Atlanta Journal Constitution should not surprise us. But I mean it's erosive of our ability to both know our culture and to appreciate it and to criticize it, and that's exactly what those Republicans don't want us to be doing. I'm glad the petition is going somewhere.

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All reader comments on this site are moderated: We welcome all civil commentary. Any comments that are inflammatory, mean spirited, spam or otherwise inappropriate will not be posted. We also discourage anonymous commenting.

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[NBCC Campaign: The Blogosphere Reminds](#)

Q: Yeah, it's getting close to 4,000 signatures -- in addition to you there's Reynolds Price, and Bobbie Ann Mason, Chris Offutt,

A: So people down there, that's great. I don't know anything about the closing down of Teresa's job that anybody else wouldn't know, but it's a small skirmish in a war we've been losing for a long time. Teresa is particularly -- to lose her -- to lose that page she designed, in that particular sphere of influence down there, to lose her is just particularly galling. And so absolutely unnecessary, completely unnecessary. Those people are making [adjectival] of money. What they're going to do eventually is put the whole thing online and there won't be anymore morning editions of that paper. But you're not going to find somebody like Teresa Weaver anywhere else who has been as loyal she has been, and made such a difference in the culture of a place which could very easily be a wasteland.

Q: When you first started publishing, were there any reviews which were encouraging?

A: There was one in the National Review. It was a nice piece that put me into a sort of frame that included agrarian writing. I didn't want to be in it -- I didn't want to be in the agrarian writing tradition. But I thought that the guy who wrote it - it was a guy named Gold.

Q: Herbert Gold?

A: No, wasn't Herb. It was somebody else. But he liked my book, and I don't think he liked it because he could force it into a bracket it that it didn't fit in, but it was a good review. I found it encouraging, and I clutched it to my bosom because Larry McMurtry tore me a new [adjectival] in the New York Times, that really rocked my boat.

**

Labels: [Author Interviews](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 12:32:00 PM



4 COMMENTS:

 J. Peder Zane said...

I am delighted by Richard Ford's support for the NBCC's campaign. But laying this problem at the feet of "Republicans" betrays a deep, follow-the-herd ignorance.

Message to Ford: There are plenty of money-grubbing, anti-intellectual Democrats running America's newsrooms.

The difference between good writing and bad is specificity -

Michael Connelly Defends the Book Review

Four Visions of Yasmina Khadra

"Save the Book Review" READ-IN outside the AJC

Roxana Robinson: Flat Screen Differs from The Book...

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knowing exactly what it is you're describing.

But you know that, so please do it. You'll be much more interesting.

2:49 PM

 **Kevin Allman** said...

Nice interview - but I wish you hadn't redacted Ford's saltier word choices. I don't think he chose those words because he's lazy with the language; he knew exactly what he was saying, and replacing them strikes my ear and eye as a little bit prissy.

Swearing in editorial copy probably isn't a good idea, but neither is it a good idea to get overly fastidious with a direct quote.

3:20 PM

 **Edward Champion** said...

If including [adjectival] in place of common words is what book reviewing now represents, that may be one of the problems. See also [Kisor's words on the subject](#).

4:14 PM

 **Anonymous** said...

To echo j. peder zane: Ford claims that "those Republicans" don't want us to "know our culture and to appreciate it and to criticize it," and yet he goes on to mention a particularly encouraging review in National Review . . . a conservative periodical.

12:34 AM

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the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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4/30/2007

A Book Fair is not a Book Section



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LAST SPRING when the NBCC started this blog, I said in an ideal world **every town in America that wanted one would have its own book festival**. Atlanta, it should be pointed, out has a very good, very big book festival -- **the Decatur Book Festival**. If you go to the website, you can see that it draws a lot of people (50,000 people), brings in a lot of advertising venue (\$145,000) and seems to give visitors the chance to eat fun foods like cotton candy and funnel cakes.

The one thing it won't do, however, is replace the passion and focus of a book editor like Teresa Weaver. Here's an analogy. To say a book festival should take the place of a book editor whose sole focus is communicating with and advocating to a local community, is like replacing a hometown basketball team with a team which comes through once, in the summer, to play an exhibition game without their

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biggest stars. *How nice for us? Oh, they're gone.*

The whole idea of having newspapers and book sections support book festivals has to do with continuity and community. Local residents would go to the book festival, have a good time, buy a book, hear an author read, *meet their book editor*, then go home and go back to the paper looking for a continuation of this experience. As Michael Connelly -- whose image appears on the Decatur Book Festival Website put it in his editorial: [book sections foster reading, newspapers need readers, it's that simple.](#)

It seems deeply unfair for a newspaper to take the advantages of a book festival -- goodwill, advertising dollars, media hits (as they are called) -- and then walk away from providing the thing so many signatories on [this petition](#) to save Atlanta's book section want: a robust, homegrown, engaged book section which runs 52 weeks a year.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 3:00:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...

Richard Ford says, "But I mean it's erosive of our ability to both know our culture and to appreciate it and to criticize it, and that's exactly what those Republicans don't want us to be doing. I'm glad the petition is going somewhere." That kind of snobbish partisanship may illustrate why the "literary" folks that dominate book reviews don't get enough readers to make review sections worth printing. Say what you want about Republican literacy, but any resistance to criticism they have pales in comparison to liberal snobbishness which expresses itself through the politically correct thought police.

Wallace Kaufman

3:43 AM

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5/01/2007

San Francisco Chronicle Book Editor Oscar Villalon on Status of the Book Review



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

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In 2001, in the wake of the Hearst Corporation buying the San Francisco Chronicle, an arrangement made all the more difficult by the drying up of newspaper classified ads, not to mention the evaporation of money that was once spilling over from the dot-com boom, the Chronicle decided to make some changes. One of its actions was to tuck the Sunday Book Review into the Sunday Datebook section — and then to reduce it from 12 tabloid pages to six.

When this new Book Review debuted on April 29, readers complained in numbers that, frankly, were unanticipated. The sustained deluge of complaints — delivered by phone, mail, e-mail, even in person — led to the paper reversing itself. On October 7, the Book Review returned, this time as a six-page broadsheet section, and as a separate — that is, stand-alone — section.

This should be considered a success story, one proving newspapers will heed their readers if they complain in large enough numbers. If enough people grumble, they will bring back your favorite comic strip. They will even restore a book review.

Six years later, it saddens me to write that I don't believe — though I very much hope to be proven wrong — newspapers are likely to reverse

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their actions, as my paper did in 2001.

There are two major and related reasons for this. One, there's little incentive for papers to restore pages to sections when it's likely that in less than a decade newspapers may be existing solely online. And two, the business practices of the '90s are finally exacting their toll. Market expectations must be met, profits must be increased, and debt from all sorts of mergers and acquisition has yet to be paid off. So staffers are being laid off, sections slashed, ads are even running on the front page. Meanwhile, remaining editors and writers are overworked and demoralized. Readers are as ravenous for good journalism and excellent writing as ever before, but they read it for free. And nobody who runs a paper is sure how to make enough money off a medium — the Internet — that's supposed to be their future, but which only makes up five percent of revenue.

It's a revenue share that keeps growing every year, but it's not certain how long the owners of newspapers are willing to tolerate little, no or declining profits till somebody figures out a way of making the Internet pay on a scale commensurate with its popularity. This is not to mention the problem of all these cuts affecting the quality of journalism available. Nobody knows if, as the scope and professionalism of journalism declines, newspaper Web sites will be frequented less and less, even if the content is free. Amid this quiet but widespread panic in our industry, the fate of book review sections isn't sounding the loudest alarm.

So then, what can we do about getting newspapers to save their book reviews? I don't know. Because first the question "What can newspapers do to save themselves?" has to be answered.--[Oscar Villalon](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:50:00 AM



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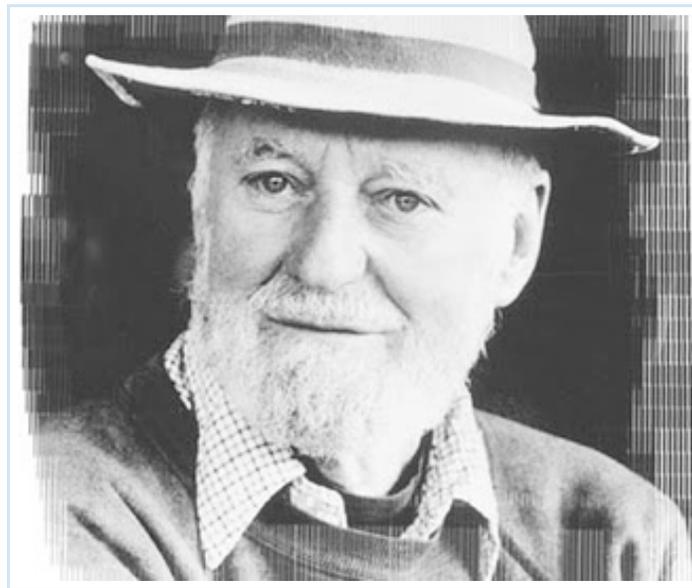
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5/01/2007

Lawrence Ferlinghetti on the Importance of Book Reviews



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features

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posts by concerned writers, op-eds, a [petition](#), Q and As, and [tips](#) about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

Q: Book sections are being cut back all across the country. What do you make of this trend -- and what can be done about it?

A: Well, the book media -- especially the book reviews -- are part of what I call the *mainstream* culture of our civilization, whereas the *dominant* culture is the military electro-media complex. That's the *dominant* civilization. But ours is the *mainstream* culture, and the book review is one of the most important parts of that culture. The *mainstream* culture is the writers, the critics, the artists, the librarians and everyone else in the intellectual and art worlds, not to mention all the institutions which support it: the universities, the libraries. Without the book reviews, one very large feature of the mainstream culture is gone to be missing,

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Q: You told me once your recent book, [Americus, I](#), got one – or maybe even zero reviews – and that even [Coney Island of the Mind](#) didn't get any. Why do you think book review sections miss books like this, and how can they do a better job of not missing them?

A: I don't know how they're going to do a better job of reviewing poetry except to review more of it! The trouble is book critics tend to be victims of the dominant culture, which values bestsellers and money more than literary writing. Book critics are victims of that same complex.

Q: What do you think the function of book reviews are – and how do they serve it differently than, say, a blog or an avid book store clerk?

A: Well bloggers are coming up in the world. If the blog culture can reach a high enough intellectual level it could be the most important media in the country for literary people. And the average book store clerk these days is the bookstore clerk in the chain bookstores. My personal experience is if the book isn't on the computer, the clerk doesn't have anything to say about that book – except in the independent bookstores.

We don't like to call them clerks in [City Lights](#) -- by the way -- we call them book people, or book men and women. I find in independent bookstore book people will know a great deal about the book. We had [Philip Lamantia](#), the surrealist poet, working at City Lights for a time and some innocent customer would ask about a certain book and he'd give them a half hour lecture on the whole genre or movement of surrealism. Half an hour later the customer would stagger to the counter with a whole armful of books on surrealism and a bewildered look.

Q: You have a Ph.D., but obviously steered clear of the academic life for that of an artist. But you have moonlighted for a while as a reviewer. Why didn't you stay in it?

A: Before we founded City Lights I was a book reviewer under the editorship of [Joseph Henry Jackson](#), who was one of the old time literary editors the likes of which doesn't exist anymore. And I reviewed for him for maybe 3 years, but then when we opened city lights, he told me that since I was now an interested party that I was no longer objective and couldn't be a book reviewer – that's what you call having a strict moral and ethical view of a book reviewer.

And then later just before the San Francisco Chronicle was bought by the Examiner, I had a column when I was poet laureate of San Francisco -- it was in the Sunday Chronicle called 'Poetry as News,' and I can't think of anything particular I learned about readers of books

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*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
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*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive*

from that -- as you know you can have a column and get very little feedback. Unless you write a column that is radical enough to get by the editor, which doesn't happen very often.

Q: San Francisco -- or at least your part of it -- seems to have a certain immunity from these dour literary trends. [Vesuvio's](#) and [City Lights](#) have survived. Is there a lesson here that our book sections could learn?

A: It's true, there are bars around [City Lights](#) like [Vesuvio's](#) and [Specs'](#) and [Café Trieste](#), which started two years [after City Lights started in 1953](#) -- these are still going strong, and they're unchanged. As for the bookstore, there are no big buildings around us big enough for a chain bookstore. Also [Telegraph Hill Dwellers Association](#) has banned any chain bookstores in North Beach, so has the [North Beach Merchants Association](#) -- there are no chain stores of any kind. There is one hardware store that might be a chain, and it's Chinese and it snuck in as an independent, I think. It did drive out the local hardware.

Q: What do you see in the future -- do you think this trend, what some critics are calling a decline in book culture, can be beaten back?

A: Well, I think it'll stop of its own because people predicted the end of the book -- people said that the end of the printed book was in sight because it will all be on television, it will all be on CDs, it will all be on electronic media, there will be audio, you can listen to it as you're traveling in its car. But this trend will die of its own limitations -- people just don't feel like reading a book from the computer screen, even though they can take a computer to bed with them, it's not the same as holding a book. It's a great aesthetic that many millions of people share -- which is the feel of holding a book, as anyone book lover will tell you, the whole sensual experience of it -- to hold a book in your hands. Holding an electronic device is not the same.

Q: What about printed book reviews -- do you see them going away?

A: Oh no, they are very important I was down at Book Expo in LA seven years ago and the Chronicle's book section had just been closed down. And the editor of the LA Times, the book editor, was bewailing it, and he said there are only two book reviews in the country -- [The New York Times](#), the LA Times, and maybe one in Chicago. Well Narda Zachino was on stage, and she was then a senior editor at the LA Times and she was on stage while the book editor was saying all this and she said, 'Stop kvetching,' and within a couple years she had transferred to become a top editor on the San Francisco Chronicle and she reinstated the book review in the San Francisco Chronicle and it's still there and it's a really important book section, in fact at a quite high level.

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??

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The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

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The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly

Q: It's a great section, but it faced cutbacks again, too. It did just go from eight pages to four.

A: Yeah, well, I don't understand why the [Book Review section here](#) doesn't get more [NYC publishers ads](#). I don't think enough pressure has been put on them for the Chronicle. New York publishers should go all out to support the Book Review in San Francisco because it's an invaluable tool for the publishing trade. If there were no book review sections in the country and the print media, publishers would be at a great disadvantage.

**

Labels: [Author Interviews](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 1:57:00 PM



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5/01/2007

NPR's "Talk of the Nation" on NBCC Campaign

Newspapers have begun to winnow down their book coverage, and since April 23 we've been devoting blog space to some of the critics, writers and readers who are up in arms over the situation. NBCC president John Freeman explains why some newspapers are eliminating book reviews from their publications on NPR's "Talk of the Nation" this afternoon.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 6:51:00 PM



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5/02/2007

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Book Editor Geeta Sharma-Jensen on Podcasting and Other Changes



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The case for book reviews has never been made as eloquently as it has been by so many on the NBCC blog. My salaams to you all. After reading the Critical Mass posts and talking with book editor friends of mine, I'm beginning to feel a little lonely here in Milwaukee. Am I among those rare book editors whose sections have remained largely intact, who've been able to retain all of their book features--from reviews to roundups to author interviews--as before, in the same place as before, even though the width of their newspaper has shrunk? Surely, besides the Washington Posts and the New York Timeses and such, there are dailies in other large cities that are supporting book review sections like the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel is? Of course there are. So, are we in la-la land, deaf to the bell that may be tolling, faintly yet, for us, too?

We know we're not immune. All newspapers are feeling the same pressures - rising newsprint costs. fleeing readers and advertisers.

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...pressures: rising newspaper costs, losing readers and advertisers, shrinking margins, and executives roving through every section to prune newsprint and staff. Book sections are not the only sections that feel the pain. But they feel it more for a few reasons.

Book pages at most papers our size are non-cash centers. They generate pitiful little money: book publishers don't advertise there; local bookstores can't afford to do much of that either, and the big chains don't seem to be rushing in with advertising dollars. But the expansive real estate is not the only reason book sections get targeted. Let me put in a few good words here for newspaper editors. They are usually not sports-or TV-loving illiterates who don't know the difference between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky or Anita Shreve and Alice Munro. Most of the ones I know are big readers. And some of them even review books. One of our publishers wrote fiction. But top editors are forced to think of re-making the book sections--or moving them, or winnowing them--in part because of a belief that a book section is among the easiest to replace or reconstitute. It's the section that can be easily built with a mixture of wire copy, freelance reviews and a few staff-written pieces--in whichever proportion you choose. It is among the easiest sections to outsource, locally or nationally. (And if you are at six pages, it is also easy to shrink to four without completely sabotaging your book coverage and riling readers.)

Struggling newspapers in these situations usually make the argument that they are not getting rid of books coverage, just folding the stories and reviews about books into the rest of their paper--while reassigning the book editor (who will likely still write about books) or reducing the number of staffers devoted just to books. It seems to me these papers want their book staff to be generalists, writing well about books and authors, sure, but able to fill in on non-book stories as well. And they figure they can use freelance reviewers, just as they've always done, and pluck a few more reviews off the wires.

I hate this McDonald's-izing of book reviews. We're all going to be sounding like everyone else, courtesy of wire services like McClatchy et al and freelance reviewers all over the nation who write for more than one paper. But for the general readers, how much difference does it make? Do they care if Ms. Local Editor writes something about Cormac McCarthy or assigns his latest book for review, or if Mr. Reputation reviews it over in San Francisco or L.A. and then it's recycled in their local paper? Or if Mr. Freelancer writes it for five or six different papers at a time? A story about McCarthy's book is a story about McCarthy's book; someone local doesn't have to write about it. Now, if McCarthy ever came to town, (oh, we wish!) then you bet someone local would write about him.

So, the thinking goes, why not have the general features editor, or an editor by any name, buy freelance pieces, add some wire copy, and then have staffers write stories and reviews for the features section or opinion pages? After all, book sections have for years been buying

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reviews from freelancers who write for a string of publications. Papers that are struggling could get rid of a staffer or two or three by doing that, not to mention reducing some very expensive newsprint.

Naturally, I don't agree with any of this. I'd argue strenuously that the intellectual health of a community depends on reading and discourse and dialogue and a breath of opinions and ideas. I would argue that the very health of a newspaper depends on readers who read books. And you know what? They'd come right back with the argument that I have laid out above - they're not getting rid of reading and discourse and dialogue and diversity, only folding them into their general coverage of topics in the community.

The danger here is that if someone doesn't own the books beat, if someone is not dedicated to literary coverage, it might get short shrift. So the NBCC is fighting the good fight in spotlighting the need for literary criticism in a cultured society. But will we be able to sway or change the course of societal and market forces? Who can say.

Newspapers also are being squeezed by online publications like Salon and Slate. There are more than 20 good book blogs alone, and they link to book review sections internationally. Even our local book store chain has excellent reviews in its monthly newsletter on the web. I hate to think how many of our readers are getting their book news online. All of which are forcing papers to think differently, to differentiate themselves somehow. Many are turning to local coverage. Marty Kaiser, executive editor at our paper, for instance, is developing a philosophy of competing with other websites and larger newspapers by not competing with them - at least not directly. "I think it's most important for newspapers and their websites to provide information that readers can't get anywhere else," he explained. "It's forcing us to become more local. Anybody can read the wire--it's community news now. They can read any paper on the web. How do you differentiate yourself if your reviews are the same as those in the New York Times, the same as those you can read online? It means you have to focus on Wisconsin and regional authors, on authors coming here."

So I'm not surprised that my bosses are pressing me to do podcasts and online chats. Ye Gads! I always swore I'd never. But in recent weeks, kicking and whining, I've been led into the sound booth, where they've introduced me to the brave new technological world of books, a world where I have to talk my thoughts into a mic instead of pounding them out on a keyboard. That first time, I would have bolted had my editor not been blocking the exit with his chair. Now, I go meekly to the recording studio. We've had to make other concessions. Our newspaper recently went to a narrower page. We no longer have room for reviews that run longer than 550 words or so.

Still, we've been lucky. Milwaukee is a super book town with book events almost every evening. The city's independent book store chain is one of the oldest and best in the nation. And the Sunday Journal

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing

Sentinel has the highest penetration in a metro market--that is, a higher percentage of metro residents subscribe to our Sunday paper than residents in other metro markets in the country. A great many of them are book people. Being locally owned, not being part of a newspaper chain, also makes a difference. Our executives and top editors all know each other and can see and sense how readers respond to books and authors. All four editors up the chain of command from me are literature lovers, and can influence the brass. Then, too, we run lean; there's no bloat. Further, the nearly two pages of book news appear in the arts section, which is supported by movie, restaurant and other entertainment ads.

In the end, our book review pages thrive because of Kaiser's support. Soft spoken and economical with words, he says simply: "I think people who read newspapers read books." I'll do my podcasts, then. But I'll be signing off with these words: "Read it in print!"--[Geeta Sharma-Jensen](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 7:40:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:



Anonymous said...

That's funny, as a publicist, whenever I've had Wisconsin-born or Wisconsin-based authors, you never give them any coverage. I guess space is limited all around, but if even you're not responsive with that hook, then one wonders if you really practice what you preach.

1:22 PM

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5/02/2007

NBCC Campaign Noted by Motoko Rich

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

Writing in today's New York Times, [Motoko Rich](#) adds another perspective to the discussion of the future of literary criticism, mentioning many of the worthy literary blogs that add to the national conversation about books.

The National Book Critics Circle board's is an online campaign, conducted on Critical Mass, which was started one year ago as the NBCC board's own literary blog. (Yes, we are litbloggers, too.) Our blogging committee includes Jessa Crispin, John Freeman, David Orr, Jennifer Reese, Rebecca Skloot (our webmaster), Lizzie Skurnick and Eric Miles Williamson. We get thousands of unique visitors a day, and are regularly linked to other blogs. The NBCC campaign is based online and discussed by lit-bloggers on Critical Mass and on other blogs throughout the country.

To date the campaign's blog series, launched April 23, has included interviews with and guest posts from George Saunders, Rick Moody, Nadine Gordimer, Roxana Robinson, Richard Ford, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Andrei Codrescu, Catherine Brady, president of the 10,000-member AWP (the AWP has added the NBCC Campaign link to its website, see button at left, made available to all on the Internet), and book editors/executives from newspapers around the country. There's more to come, along with more op eds and blog posts throughout the country (in print and online publications including the Los Angeles Times, Huffington Post, Poynter, The Guardian).

The NBCC's online [petition](#) has more than 4500 signatures as of this morning (just added: Salman Rushdie and David Mitchell, who had this to say: "I'm a British writer who lives in Japan and Ireland but there is only one Republic of Books whose citizens we all are. A newspaper

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*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Book
Editor Geeta Sharm...*

*NPR's "Talk of the Nation" on
NBCC Campaign*

should fortify it, not attack it"). NBCC president John Freeman will be in Atlanta tomorrow to be part of a Save the Book Review Read-in at the Constitution-Journal. (Details [here](#).) And see Atlanta's Fox News report [here](#).

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:45:00 AM



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5/02/2007

Wednesday Roundup

In today's [Poynter column](#) on book critics to the ramparts, Ellen Heltzel writes, "When it made the decision to combine its book section and op-ed pages into a single tab as an economy measure, the Los Angeles Times' book editor managed some artful dodging: The events calendar and the bestseller list were moved to the Web, which is growing as an alternative medium for book editors nationwide. No review space was sacrificed, and no staff was eliminated. The NBCC hopes its call to arms will have a similar effect elsewhere. At the least, it is alerting newspapers and readers that book sections matter. Now the critics' group needs to start another discussion: how to make books and reading more visible everywhere else. Newspapers are not the only outlet that can carry the cultural conversation to a wide audience. Just ask Oprah."

Over at [CJRDaily](#), Gal Beckerman points to the "organic link between books and newspapers."

Meanwhile, hats off to [McSweeney's](#) for winning a National Magazine Award in fiction for short stories by T. C. Boyle, Susan Steinberg and Rajesh Parameswaran.

And to [Rajiv Chandrasekaran](#), winner of the [Overseas Press Club's](#) Cornelius Ryan Award for best nonfiction book on international affairs for "Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Iraq's Green Zone," published by Knopf. At the awards ceremony, Chandrasekaran joined other awardees who had covered Iraq, including [Kimberly Dozier](#), who accepted the OPC President's award on behalf of 261 journalists killed and wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan and 49 injured, and George Packer, honored for "[The Lesson of Tal Afar](#)" in the New Yorker, in calling for support for the Iraqis who have put their lives at risk by helping Western journalists report their stories, including the many Iraqi translators and fixers who will be left behind when the U.S. withdraws from Iraq. The OPC is compiling a list of all those wounded and killed in these conflicts. "The names of the correspondents and photographers of major news organizations are usually reported, but

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*NBCC Campaign Noted by Motoko Rich
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Book Editor Geeta Sharm...*

the stringers, guides and translators to whom the reporter is indebted, are often missing," said OPC president Marshall Loeb. "We have tried to provide those missing links."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Roundups](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:26:00 PM



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5/03/2007

NBCC and Atlantans Protest Outside the AJC Today

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WHAT: ATLANTA Save the Book Review READ-IN! Bring a book (or many books!) you love, and let's create a critical mass of readers to put the pressure on the Atlanta Journal-Constitution to reverse its terrible decision to "reorganize" its book review out of existence! [They got rid of the book review editor](#), and without an official champion for books within the paper, the quality of books coverage is endangered! It will become disorganized and sporadic, if not simply perfunctory, until, worse, it's no longer there.

TIME: 10:00 AM until...you decide!

DATE: TODAY, *rain or shine

LOCATION: Converge in front of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution at 72 Marietta Street. Hold open your book and read aloud or to yourself. Trust me, you won't be the only one. Picture hundreds of people doing the same thing! [*directions below]

WHO: Open to any and all readers and lovers of books, newspapers and literary discussion. Come one, come all Atlantans (or ATLiens), Georgians, and maybe even some of you hardcore out-of-staters. On hand to say a few words: Atlanta novelists Joshilyn Jackson and Joseph Skibell, bookseller Philip Rafshoon of Outwrite Books, George Weinstein of Atlanta Writers Club, and Shannon Byrne of Little, Brown.

WHY: Because the city of Atlanta wants a robust, reader-friendly, intelligent book review, not just a section run on auto-pilot from above.

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

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[Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Book](#)

Teresa Weaver has created and run exactly this kind of section for almost ten years now and we want the AJC to reward her expertise, not eliminate her job. Again, if you haven't signed the 'Protect Atlanta's Book Review ' petition yet, here's the link to it: ['Protect Atlanta's Book Review '](#)

DIRECTIONS: **MARTA:** The MARTA stop is Five Points. Exit onto Marietta St., the AJC building is less than two blocks west (left). For an online Citysearch map, look [here](#).

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 4:24:00 AM



5 COMMENTS:

DJ Cayenne said...

How its going:

<http://www.babygotbooks.com/2007/05/03/notes-from-a-demonstration/>

10:39 AM

Jane Ciabattari said...

Hey, thanks. Okay to post yr photo of tom key? will link as soon as I get a minute. Jane

11:17 AM

DJ Cayenne said...

Help yourself. The pic was from my telephone. I'll post pics from those this evening. Feel free to use whatever you like.

12:51 PM

David Orr said...

Thanks, DJ. You keep posting; we'll keep linking. For what it's worth, there's nothing about this on the AJC site as yet, although I do see a pic of Paris Hilton and something about apartments that are "pastoral sleek."

2:18 PM

Jane Ciabattari said...

Fox News linked to the later post...

3:35 PM

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LINKS TO THIS POST:

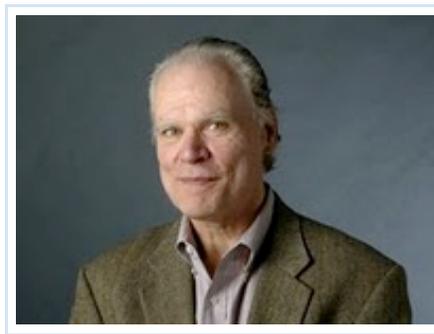
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5/03/2007

Conversation with Dallas Morning News Editor Bob Mong



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of the [campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those

same owners and editors know that [book sections and book culture matter](#).

As editor of The Dallas Morning News, Bob Mong sets the strategic direction of the paper's news and editorial pages. He recently responded to the following questions about the paper's recent cutbacks and how book coverage fits into the features package.

Q. Can you summarize how many cuts have been made and where they're occurred, and the thinking behind them?

A. Like all major metro newspapers, we have reduced the size of our professional news staff and must do more with less. We continue to have the largest and most experienced news and editorial staff in Texas, and from my perspective, in the South. As for space and staff allocation, we are first and foremost a local and regional news and information company. We are best known for our strong investigative and enterprise reporting, for skilled local and state public policy reporting, for excellent border and Mexico reporting, for national-class education coverage, for our sports section, for an outstanding editorial page (and for its imaginative Points commentary section on Sunday), for solid business coverage, for national-class photography and videography, for thoughtful arts and entertainment coverage – to name a few areas of excellence.

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[NBCC Campaign Noted by Motoko](#)

Q. How much space and staffing is currently dedicated to book criticism – that is, reviews? How does that compare to a year ago? Five years ago?

A. We devote the same amount of space to book criticism that we did five years ago. The Dallas Morning News covers books in its Sunday arts and entertainment section as well as in its Business section and on its Religion pages on Saturday. We have one fulltime staffer assigned to books; we had two five years ago.

Q. How about space and staffing for book coverage over all?

A. Space for books coverage is comparable to what existed five years ago. Additionally, we have built a strong partnership with the Mayborn Institute at the University of North Texas as a top sponsor of the Mayborn Literary Journalism conference, now in its third season. This brings in outstanding authors to explore the craft of narrative writing. We send many of our staffers to this event, and others on our staff teach at the conference.

Q. Your book editor, Michael Merschel, has incorporated a [blog](#) into the paper's book coverage. What kind of audience does it have? How does it replace or supplement print coverage?

A. Our blog appeals to readers who are passionate about books. One of the benefits of the web is its interactivity, bringing to a large institution like ours the capacity to be smaller and more intimate. I applaud Mike Merschel for developing this blog.

Q. The NBCC has launched a Campaign to Save Reviewing that was spurred in part because of the DMN's decision to eliminate the post of book critic. From the group's perspective, this decision seems a curious choice for a newspaper that has covered books conspicuously for the past half-century. How would you describe your paper's legacy covering books and literature?

A. We have covered books for much longer than 50 years. Katherine Anne Porter's early books were reviewed in our pages. Lon Tinkle was the voice of book criticism in the Southwest for many years. I intend to be opportunistic in finding first-rate folks to write about books in our pages. One of our most gifted reporters, Michael Granberry, wrote a beautiful appreciation of David Halberstam on the cover of GuideLive this week. This is a dynamic situation, and we are still adjusting to last year's buyouts. I would encourage you to stay in touch with me on this subject.

Rich

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Book

Editor Geeta Sharm...

NPR's "Talk of the Nation" on

NBCC Campaign

Lawrence Ferlinghetti on the

Importance of Book Re...

Remembering Ryszard

Kapuscinski

San Francisco Chronicle Book

Editor Oscar Villalon...

A Book Fair is not a Book Section

Richard Ford on the Folly of

Removing Teresa Weave...

Past Posts Of Note

Reviewing 101: John Updike's

*Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

Speaking of Updike: The safety of

criticism and his writing

routine, and feeling glum about

the future

The NBCC's Tips For Successful

Book Reviewing

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30

Books in 30 Days

How We Choose Links for

Roundup

What's Graphic and What's a

*Novel and who's trying to ban
them?*

Pub Date? What Pub Date? also

Embargo Follies

On Reviewers' Notes and Writing

in Books

The Rest of the Best: The Books

That Didn't Make it Onto the

NYTBR Best Book Survey

Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'

Best Book Survey

To see Who Voted for What and

Why in the NYTBR Best Book

Survey, scroll through the June

Q. Former DMN book critic [Jerome Weeks](#) describes Dallas as an “aspirational” city – i.e., one that wants to be a player on the national stage. He argues that the paper is not supplying its readers with book coverage – and, more generally, cultural coverage -- that fits the city’s intellectual ambitions. What’s your response?

A. Debate is the fuel of democracy, and Jerome Weeks can argue with the best of them. I happen to disagree with him. Just look at our outstanding multi-day, front-page display of arts patron Raymond Nasher’s obituary and complementary material. It is emblematic of how we approach a cultural story of that magnitude. Media and pop culture writer Tom Maurstad hosts salons at a local museum on arts topics. I would put Lawson Taitte and Scott Cantrell against anyone’s theater and classical music critics; plus both of them are amazingly versatile. Our cinema critic, Chris Vognar, certainly covers the showier movies but specializes in raising the visibility of less well known movies that often convey more meaning and power. Our popular music critics are very good too.

Q. The NBCC believes book coverage in general and book criticism in particular is an easy target for newspapers that are trying to trim costs. Book coverage doesn’t generate advertising. Is this the primary reason it’s so vulnerable?

A. I consider coverage of books to be essential to our future.--[Ellen Heltzel](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:00:00 AM



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5/03/2007

This Just in from Today's Atlanta Demonstration



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[Baby Got Books](#) reporting from this morning's demonstration in Atlanta, notes that Tom Key, the king of Atlanta theater and head of The Theatrical Outfit, was reading aloud from "To Kill a Mockingbird" and "The Moviegoer."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:38:00 AM



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5/03/2007

Joseph Skibell's Plea to the Atlanta Journal-Constitution



Along with the CNN, C-Span, Fox News cameras, print reporters, independent bookstore owners, authors, readers and critics (including NBCC president John Freeman, who delivered the NBCC's [online petition](#) with nearly 5,000 signatures to Atlanta Journal-Constitution editor Julia Wallace), award winning novelist and Emory professor Joseph Skibell was on hand at today's demonstration protesting the

elimination of the book review editor's position at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He shares his remarks:

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The Nazis knew how important books were to a free and liberal society – and that's why they burned them. The Soviets as well. Not only were books suppressed in Stalinist Russia, but writers were rounded up and shot. The Soviets believed writers were simply too dangerous to the system. You see this again and again. Whenever a despot comes to power, the first people to go are the writers.

In America, however, we silence our writers in another way. We silence them through indifference. We claim that their only function is entertain us, and then we complain that they're boring. According to the Atlanta Journal Constitution, writing – literature – books – is less important than the crime beat in Marietta or Gwinnett or the Buckhead Society page.

No books are burned, no writers are murdered by the state, but through this great and terrible indifference – through this terrible belittling of the Western Intellectual Tradition – a tradition based upon the importance and primacy of books – based upon the importance of ideas in books – of ideas circulating through books – our basic freedoms are

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eroded and, in this case, willingly surrendered – and here surrendered by the fifth estate, by the newspapers whose job it is not only to report the news, but to reflect a city back to itself.

If Atlanta is the capital of the New South, is that a south that doesn't need its books? A south that doesn't needs its universities? A south that doesn't need intellectual inquiry and discussion? Is all that only for New York? I don't think so. A society that denigrates books, is a society that denigrates free thought, and a society that denigrates free thought is a society that ultimately denigrates freedom.

I urge the Atlanta Journal Constitution to reconsider its decision to eliminate its Book Editor. More is at stake than just one talented woman's job. More is at stake than just the latest reviews of the newest detective novel. Our very sense of who we are is at stake. We can either stand with the Nazis and the Soviets and the Taliban – who destroyed books and burned them and belittled them – or we can stand with the Jeffersons and the Franklins and the Whitmans and the Faulkners who knew that a book – that funny little oblong object – is perhaps all that keeps a society, a city, a nation free.--[Joseph Skibell](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:51:00 PM



3 COMMENTS:

S Sarah Weinman said...

Here is CNN's piece:

<http://www.cnn.com/SHOWBIZ/blogs/marquee/2007/05/who-reads-books-anymore.html>

3:36 PM

S Sarah Weinman said...

And PW's:

<http://www.publishersweekly.com/article/CA6438995.html>

4:51 PM

S Jane Ciabattari said...

Thanks Sarah, I'm posting some pix now, will add these links...

5:19 PM

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LINKS TO THIS POST:

[More from the Protest](#)

[He forgot to mention Savonarola](#)

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5/03/2007

Protest at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #1



NBCC
President
John
Freeman
and author
[Alain de
Botton](#) ,
author of
"Proust Can
Save Your
Life," were
in the crowd

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at this morning's read-in protesting the elimination of the book editor's job at the Atlanta Constitution-Journal.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:24:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

[Grapeshot/Odette](#) said...
Right on!
8:59 AM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

- [There's No Substitute for Quality](#)
- [There's No Substitute for Quality](#)
- [Read in at the Atlanta Journal](#)

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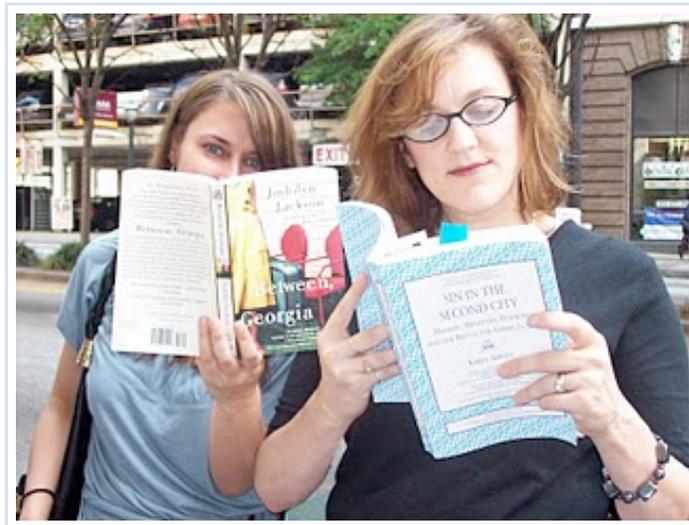
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5/03/2007

Protest at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #2



[Joshilyn Jackson](#), author of "gods in Alabama" and "Between, Georgia," and [Karen Abbott](#), whose "Sin

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in the Second City" is due out in July, reading from their work at the Read-in outside the offices of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:30:00 PM



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5/03/2007

Read-in at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #3



Marc Fitten
of the

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[Chattahoochee Review](#) and Ginger Collins of the Atlanta Writer's Club, among the organizers of the Read-In, gathered signatures on petitions on the ground in Atlanta while the NBCC petition was filling up online.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 5:15:00 PM



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5/03/2007

Read-in at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #4



Fox news, CNN, C-span all covered the Read-in. (Cameraman here with NBCC president John Freeman.) This report

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on CNN.com led to dozens of comments within hours, mostly from people who love books ("I'm a total info junkie, addicted to the net, my cell, DVDs, you name it, but nothing could ever replace reading as my #1 passion").

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 5:20:00 PM



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5/03/2007

Read-in at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #5



Another signature added to the petition to save the book review editor's position at the Read-in organized by the NBCC outside

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offices of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The NBCC's online [petition](#) has 4848 names so far, plus the signatures added in Atlanta at bookstores and during the protest. More in this report in [PW](#). And in this afternoon's blog post on [Fox News](#).

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 5:29:00 PM



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5/03/2007

Read-in at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution #6



NBCC President John Freeman, putting in a call to [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) Editor Julia Wallace at today's protest. Freeman later met with her and discussed concerns about diminishing books coverage in the newspaper. Watch for his report here.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 5:51:00 PM



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2 COMMENTS:



Denise Low said...

How remarkable is the lack of national coverage and/or the misleading coverage. The NYT sidestepped the issue of its abdication of responsibility for book culture and instead did a puff on blogging. Thanks to Critical Mass for providing information!

9:04 PM



DJ Cayenne said...

Some more pics of the day here:

<http://www.babygotbooks.com/2007/05/03/more-from-the-protest/>

7:47 AM

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5/04/2007

Around the World on Friday...beginning in Atlanta



Local Fox 5 TV covered the READ IN in Atlanta yesterday, and [their story is up here](#). Creative Loafing, Atlanta's alt-weekly newspaper, [checked in on the lay of the land today, too](#).

[Babygotbooks.com](#) has a dispatch from the protest, as did CNN.com's [Todd Leopold](#), prompting 344(!) comments.

Norman Mailer, Yann Martel, Monica Ali and Colm Toibin are the latest signers of the NBCC petition to protest the cutbacks in Atlanta.

Meanwhile, in the New York Review, [Hermione Lee](#) thinks about the novel.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 9:21:00 AM



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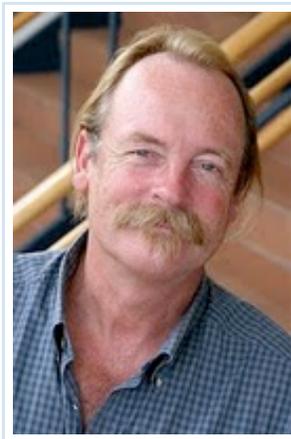
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5/04/2007

Bill Roorbach on the Literary Landscape

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, [a petition protesting recent cutbacks at the AJC](#), Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.



May, 1989, and I'm walking into Pat Towers's office at Seven Days magazine, a New York City weekly now long defunct. I'm having trouble finding her, though the room's no bigger than a good-size closet. And I'm nervous because she's giving me a break, assigning me a book to review, and now more nervous because the room is jammed with spines, and Pat's desk (if there is one) is hidden among thousands of books piled pell-mell, mountains of bound galleys obscuring

shelves laden but long obviated.

The secretary has sent me in, I'm shaking in my boots, but Pat's not there.

Then something in the corner moves: Pat, who blends right into the background, horizontally striped blouse. She's handing me a little pile of bound galleys, books she's plucked from the avalanche thinking I'll like them, all based on what she knows about me: books about fishing, ferns, gardens, love, reggae music.

And these books were news -- new thinking on old subjects, new worlds of fiction, whole new galaxies in poetry -- hard news. And newspapers, especially culture weeklies, had an obligation to report on and respond to news. That was clear and everyone knew it -- there was no advertising imperative tacked to this good news, any more than there

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was to the front-page news (I mean imagine: "Reagan's been shot? Get advertising to call Remington Rifle Works!").

Pat spent her days culling and gleaning and cherry-picking, looking for the top news in the constant flow of titles -- just like any editor, sorting the news from the dross -- and all to the benefit of her readers, who trusted her to make sense of the maelstrom.

Well, Seven Days died, and not because of books: books are alive and still news. Yet book-review sections like honey bees are dying mysteriously: if books are still news and advertising is not the point and if readers are perforce the most reliable customers of newspapers what's the cause?

And where will our honey come from?

-- [Bill Roorbach](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 11:16:00 AM



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5/04/2007

Speaking of Blogs and News

Denise Low, Poet Laureate of Kansas, notes on her blog, [Ad Astra](#), "I commend the current Kansas City Star book editor [John Mark Eberhart](#), who makes the most of his allotted space to review local writers or at least briefly note their books. He is one of a handful of editors who publishes poetry every Sunday, even before former U.S. poet laureate Ted Kooser's syndicated column. Yet I must search through pounds of paper to find the few book pages. In my local newspaper, the [Lawrence Journal World](#), I turn to a section called "Pulse" to find a few reprinted reviews, features about local authors, and, luckily, because of another enlightened arts editor—[Mindie Paget](#)—a poem."

The Lawrence Journal World was spawning ground of [Adrian Holovaty](#), editor of editorial innovations at [washingtonpost.com](#), who gave this year's 2007 Hearst New Media Lecturer at [Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism](#) a few weeks back. This week he launched CampaignTracker, a Django-powered searchable database of 2008 presidential campaign events on the Post website.

Meanwhile, the Washington Post looks at the [online political operatives](#) who are running the 2008 presidential candidates' websites, including the legendary [Joe Trippi](#).

Duke Professor Cathy Davidson notes, "We Techies Read Too," on the HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, Technology Advanced Collaboratory or "haystack")[blog](#).

University of Mississippi Professor [Samir Husni](#), known as "[Mr Magazine](#)," for his annual updates on magazines, had this to say recently on the shift in the newspaper industry: "That's why I say newspapers in this country are not dying, they are committing suicide. You go to speak in newspaper newsrooms, I've gone to speak about the future of newsrooms, and their first reaction is that 'You are the anti-christ. You want us to do what? Do more than just go to a board meeting and record it and spit it out? We have to analyze and go beyond that?' Even the Internet is too late to provide me the

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beyond that: Even the internet is too late to provide me the information. Whatever happens in the world now I get an alert on my Blackberry. The immediacy of news delivery can no longer be done in a newspaper.

"We have to change the name of a newspaper to daily paper. We have to accept the fact that we have to go beyond the 5 W's and H [who, when, what, where, why and how] and start talking about 'what's in it for me?' and leave the 5 W's and H to electronic delivery because we cannot compete with that. Newsweek and Time are like a snapshot in time. Instead of giving you a summary of the news, they need to give you an in-depth analysis on a few topics."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Roundups](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:45:00 AM



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5/05/2007

Atlanta Petition Reaches 5000 Signatures



The NBCC's [petition](#) to protest the decision of removing the book editor job at the AJC reached 5,000 online signatures this morning. It has also gone overseas. This week, [Erica Wagner has written her column about it in the Times \(UK\)](#).

Thanks to everyone for the support. And if you haven't read

it or signed, forwarded to a friend who might care, [please have a look](#). It is making a difference. Stay tuned for future updates on the situation there, and for many more dispatches from writers, booksellers, publishers, bloggers and readers as the NBCC campaign to raise awareness on this issue continues.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 11:50:00 AM



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1 COMMENTS:

[GaysforRomney](#) said...

I happily signed the petition and would very much like for the book review sections of all newspapers to be even stronger than they were before the recent cutbacks.

But the primary problem facing newspaper publishers causing them to make these decisions is a financial one, largely a sharp falloff in advertiser revenue.

[Scott McLemee](#)

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If the literary community is one which values ideas above all, how about a serious discussion of how we can help newspapers increase advertising revenue so that they can again have the kind of book review sections we would all like to see?

9:13 PM

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5/06/2007

Crooked River Ain't Burning Yet



Over at the Plain Dealer in Cleveland, [book editor Karen Long weighs in](#) on the discussion of print book reviews and has this to say:

"The fact that Winslow, literary editor of The Nation for several years, [sounded his cri de coeur in cyberspace](#) carries some extra grit into our eyes. Because even as the National Book Critics Circle gathers signatures and

stages a protest in front of the bricks-and-mortar [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#), a number of bloggers are borderline gleeful, ready to polish their dancing shoes for a nice tap across the graves of old mainstream media.

This, of course, is a false choice. As much as I love [The Book Babes](#) - "Two veteran book critics who believe books are better than Botox" - this pair will never be in a position to tell you, as [Kathy Englehart did two weeks ago](#), which children's books to read with your kids before visiting the Monet exhibit at the Cleveland Museum of Art."

Long talked to Plain Dealer assistant managing Debbie Van Tassel, and editor Douglas Clifton, both of whom affirmed the paper's continued commitment to books.

"[Clifton] noted the natural affinity between book readers and newspaper readers, a crossover that cultivates both camps. It seems ridiculous that when television is busy affirming books - on "Oprah" and "The Daily Show" and Al Roker's new kids book club - that newspapers should lose their way."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 12:43:00 PM



8 COMMENTS:

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 [Ron](#) said...

"A number of bloggers are borderline gleeful, ready to polish their dancing shoes for a nice tap across the graves of old mainstream media."

Name one. I'm fairly certain that none of the bloggers cited in the *NYT* article earlier this week would cop such an attitude, for example, particularly since "old mainstream media" is increasingly hiring them to add much-needed verve to their book review sections.

Ron (Beatrice.com)

1:25 PM

 Anonymous said...

Seems funny to me that of all the things said in that column, you, Mr. Freeman, would choose to make that the quoted portion. Why don't you come right out and say what your problem with blogs is instead of all of these not so subtle insinuations? I think everyone would be interested in reading your opinion on the matter.

Besides, she's wrong. I read a lot of the book blogs and I've yet to read one that is gloating over this. In fact, most have been supportive of the NBCC's effort.

3:10 PM

 [Edward Champion](#) said...

What Ron said, with the addendum that one should be careful not to conflate the intent of the satire with the feelings of the satirist herself.

For what it's worth, when I talked with Motoko Rich, she seemed surprised to hear that I was very critical of blogs. I also told her that both sides needed to look inward and reach out to each other.

4:20 PM

 Chuck said...

This is the funniest thing I've seen all week. Here are examples #1 and #2 of bloggers who gloat over this situation! I realize amnesia is bad in this dear country, ole sweaty ones, but don't you guys realize the evidence is on your stupid websites? Like Bill Cosby said boys, the proof is in the pudding!

6:04 PM

 [Edward Champion](#) said...

Chuck Baby: If the "evidence is on your stupid websites," then why not simply cite it? It's funny that those who decry one side or the other in this needless little war often fail to cite specifics

Speaking of Blogs and News

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Why Do Critics Ignore Certain

to prove their points. One would think that a body of critics would be interested in a bit of healthy discussion, both inward and outward, predicated upon examples. But as Disraeli once put it, it is easier to be critical than correct.

7:32 PM

 **Ron Hogan** said...

If you've got a link to one of our posts that proves your allegation, Chuck, feel free to share it with the rest of the class. Otherwise, I can't imagine any reason why anyone here should take you seriously. If there's one thing I've learned from online discourse, it's this: Put up or shut up.

Here's the thing, though: You can't just use a post where I criticize individual book reviewers for being shortsighted about this issue (or just wrongheaded in general), or even one where I point out that the newspaper industry has been shooting itself in the foot with regards to book review sections and that the current situation is the inevitable consequence. Only a non-satirical post in which I explicitly stated that I personally am aquiver with anticipation at the impending demise of the book review sections of America will do. If you don't have that, then stay offline and let the experts handle the debate.

8:28 PM

 **Dan Wickett** said...

I would also love to find out specifically which bloggers are gleeful.

Personally, I told Ms. Rich that the first thing I do EVERY Sunday is open the Detroit Free Press to the book page (yes, page, singular). Even though the majority of the reviews on a weekly basis are wire copy, and not written by somebody in Detroit, or the area, I still hit that before the sports page, before the editorial, or any other section.

I told her that the demise, or even reduction, of print reviews was the absolute last thing that this individual, who happens to blog, but more importantly loves to read, and discuss literature, wanted to see.

1:45 PM

 **Fred Bortz** said...

As a sometimes contributor of reviews of science books to Karen Long's outstanding book review section at the Cleveland Plain Dealer, I know she appreciates freelance niche reviewers like me, and I know how hard she struggles to find money to pay us.

Just today, I heard from another editor who likes my work but has seen her freelance budget nearly dry up. Not this review, she told me, but maybe the next one for a July book that I'm very high on -- if the freelance situation changes.

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly

Last year, I was frequently able to sell my reviews to at least three noncompeting newspapers. This year, I rarely sell beyond my primary client, the Dallas Morning News. And for every review I sell there, I know that other excellent freelancers are being crowded out.

Sad....

Fred Bortz

www.fredbortz.com -- children's science

www.scienceshelf.com -- science book reviews

4:04 PM

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5/06/2007

Bookseller-Turned-Author Lauren Baratz-Logsted on the Value of Books

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.



Lauren Baratz-Logsted is the author of seven published books for adults and teens including "Vertigo" (Random House), "How Nancy Drew Saved My Life" (Red Dress Ink), and "Angel's Choice" (Simon Pulse). She has worked as a bookseller, a PW reviewer, a freelance editor, a sort-of librarian and a window washer. When

NBCC Vice President/Membership Jane Ciabattari checked in recently with Readerville.com, where Lauren was celebrating an offer for the first four books in a children's series to be written with her husband and daughter, and asked for volunteers for the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews and book culture, she responded with this post:

Before I became a published author, I worked for 11 years at Klein's of Westport, a now-defunct independent bookstore that in its heyday was the largest of its kind in the northeast. One day a woman came into the store with dark Jackie O sunglasses on, but even with the huge shades I could still see the tear tracks staining her cheeks. She told me she didn't

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care what I gave her; she just needed a good book. Not knowing what her problems were, but figuring books about death and depression probably wouldn't do, I gave her a copy of Olive Ann Burns' delightful novel "[Cold Sassy Tree](#)." She didn't even look at what I was giving her as she handed over the money and I put her purchase in a bag.

She came back the next week. She told me what her problems had been and they were the kind of pile of awful troubles that would knock any feeling person for a loop. Then she told me that I'd saved her life. Maybe she was hyperbolating, but I knew what she was talking about. When the world turns awful, it does feel as though books can save a reading person's life.

That's why we need book reviews to expand, not shrink: so that booksellers and consumers can learn about more great books to recommend and read, even if none of those reviews are ever about my books. --[Lauren Baratz-Logsted](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:42:00 PM



9 COMMENTS:

Mickey Spencer said...

That's a great story, and I heard many like it when I worked in an independent bookstore!

Most book reviews can (and possibly should) be taken with a grain of salt, but they are an invaluable tool for finding new books to read! If I'm hesitant about buying one, I note the title & author and go search for reviews to help me decide if I really want to try it.

I try to post my own reviews periodically on Amazon- if I can help someone else find a great read, it's worth the time!

9:16 PM

Carolyn Burns Bass said...

Bravo, Lauren, for knowing just the book to suggest. I'm not surprised that you looked beyond the lady's shades and saw what she really needed. I'll bet you gave her a huge smile with her change.

9:42 PM

Lauren Baratz-Logsted said...

Thanks for stopping by, Mickey!

Thanks, Carolyn - let's just say I was less rude to that woman than I often was to customers. :)

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7:46 AM

 [Simone Elkeles](#) said...

Go Lauren! As an author, not only are reviews important for me because it helps spread the word to people who don't know about me or my books, it gives me quotes I can use to publicize.

Reviews are invaluable!

~Simone Elkeles
author of teen novels
www.simoneelkeles.com

8:13 AM

 Lady Madonna said...

Great job on selecting a book for her. There's definately been a few times that I've felt the need to "disappear" into a good book for just a bit to get away from dealing with the reality of the situation at hand. Book reviews are an increadibly helpful tool in spreading the word about different authors and their creations. I especially like the ones on people's blogs, amazon, etc. Word of mouth is a powerful tool!

A good site to check out if you like reviewing your own books, and/or seeing what other people are into reading is www.goodreads.com! You list all of the books that you've read, or plan to read. Then you rate, and if you'd like you can review them. Check it out, it's well worth it!

9:12 AM

 [Lauren Baratz-Logsted](#) said...

Thanks, Simone and Lady M! Yes, to me it really is all about spreading the word about good books. It would be a shame if print reviews died out, because they do perform a valuable cultural function.

11:01 AM

 [Lisa McMann](#) said...

I too worked in an independent bookstore for several years before writing my books, and heard some amazing stories from people. Thanks for sharing yours!

Book reviews are crucial not only to authors, but to all those wonderful booksellers who rely on the assistance of reviews, knowing there's no way to read every book in the store.

Great post, Lauren!

1:13 PM

 [jenny gardiner](#) said...

That's a great story. It's so sad that all of the wonderful things

*Writers Read Your Contracts
Earth to Academia
Medical Apartheid: Research
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics
Criticism For Sale??
No Buzz Marketing or Amazon
Paybacks
What to do with review copies?
This or maybe this.
The Best Way to Respond to a Bad
Review
Don't Know Much About
Counterinsurgency*

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time
Magazine
Mark Rotella, Review Editor,
Publishers Weekly
Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,
Investigative Reporter
Karen Long, Book Editor,
Cleveland Plain Dealer
M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review
Founder
Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
Editor, Minneapolis Star
Tribune
Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,
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Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning
News Staff Critic
Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
Post
Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist
Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle
Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle
Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly
Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*

that give color and shape and texture to our lives is what is the first to go due ot budget constraints. Pretty soon we'll all be living in a world the monochromatic shade of desert combat fatigues...

1:28 PM

 Lauren Baratz-Logsted said...

Thanks, Jenny and Lisa - here's to booksellers everywhere!

But, Jenny: "Pretty soon we'll all be living in a world the monochromatic shade of desert combat fatigues..."??? - Step away from the window! We've got to fix these problems, not despair!

1:47 PM

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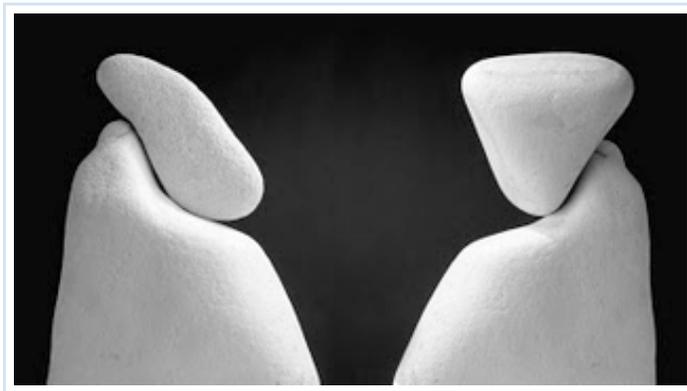
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5/06/2007

The Importance of Dialogue



LAST WEEK, THE NBCC held its first ever bricks and mortar protest in 33 years of existence.

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With the help of local booksellers in Atlanta, readers, writers, and an enormous organizational push from Shannon Byrne, we staged a read-in at the offices of the Atlanta Journal Constitution.

Why? As had long been expected, the AJC announced a massive reorganization of its entire newsroom, eliminating numerous jobs, from the book editor to many other positions. During lunch hour on Thursday, outside the office of the paper, I talked to a maintenance worker whose department was cut from 52 jobs down to 30. "I've got 26 years experience," he said, "I'm fine. We've got a union. But anyone with less than 10? They're gone."

As anyone who reads a paper today knows, the news industry is changing -- slowly, painfully, and with a wary eye at "new" competition. And as Los Angeles Times Book Review editor David Ulin pointed out last week, at the start of this NBCC campaign to raise awareness about what's happening to the print book review, it's not necessarily that it's the book pages being targeted -- in some cases, it's just their turn.

Still, we're not going to sit back and watch this happen, watch papers cede their cultural authority to forms which provide less to readers, and in so doing undercut their very essential interest -- their civic duty -- of fostering cultural literacy. It seems an abject lack of courage for papers to point to Amazon reviews, as I have heard some editors say, or blogs,

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and say such 'competition' means the raison d'etre of a book page is threatened. Did talk radio ever threaten the sports page?

And so we went down to Atlanta, gathered up a few bullhorns and books, a few signs and a copy of "The Moviegoer," and made a little noise. Judging by the response to this CNN [blog post](#), or this most recent [editorial in the Walton Tribune](#), we're not alone in being worried about the AJC's ability to cover a field as wide and intense as books without a book editor, let alone one as passionate and experienced as Teresa Weaver. The response to the [NBCC's petition](#) has been overwhelming, and to anyone who signed it or passed it on, or just thought about it for a moment -- thank you.

I can also say we are being heard. After two hours of protesting, [the AJC sent down a p.r. person and brought myself and Shannon up to a meeting with editor, Julia Wallace](#), and newly installed managing editor/print, Bert Roughton. For an hour they listened to our concerns, and spoke to us of the wider context for the paper's reorganization. We traded ideas about what book sections are missing, what they can do with new technology, we expressed our doubt that a paper could do as good a job covering books with fewer people to do it, and by the meeting's close, Wallace had promised to send the paper's new features editor, Melissa Turner, who will be overseeing books, to BEA for an NBCC panel on the changing nature of newspapers and how this affects books coverage.

As gracious as they were -- and there's nothing like southern hospitality -- I think the most moving part of the trip last week was talking to people on the street outside the AJC and around Atlanta. There were the usual groups of people who didn't want to be handed a piece of paper on their way to work. But many more stopped and were concerned, and were more than happy to share their opinions of a paper into which they'd like to have some input. I came away feeling that every critic should be required to spend an hour on the street with their work, talking to the strangers who read it. It's inspiring and energizing. It reminds you of one of the essential functions of cultural criticism -- namely, its ability to reach across geographical, cultural, racial and political boundaries to speak from one person to the next in an intimate way.

The AJC has said they will continue books coverage, but in a different form -- with more of a local focus, without a book editor, and with an eye on local stories. We applaud their investment in local coverage, but we remain wary of their ability to do so without a person assigned to the books beat -- every paper which has attempted the same has saw a diminishment of their section. [So the NBCC petition to raise awareness about this issue in Atlanta will continue](#), but in the interest of good faith dialogue with the paper and the people who read it, now is the time to

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bring forward ideas. Do you have any? We want to know.

There are a lot of questions to think about -- should a paper use wire copy for non-local writers as a way to free up resources to spend money on local coverage? Is something lost when everything outside a region is filtered to you by critics who have no affiliation with a newspaper? What are book sections missing? What features could they add at little cost? Are there ways to bring bookseller, bookclub and reading series sponsor voices into the paper? What design elements might make book sections more appealing to look at? What do international book sections have which American book sections? Should the AJC expand its online content? If so, how?

One of the points this campaign needs to make, without flogging ourselves with it, is that book review sections have to shoulder some blame in cutbacks. There's nothing deadlier than a badly written book review -- or a badly designed book page. If book pages are to become a primary node of outreach into communities for newspapers -- as I think they can be -- they need to be stylish, fun, enticing, up-to-date and well-written. They also have to be defended, which is [where the NBCC comes in](#) and [which is why we will continue our petition in Atlanta](#). If the paper is going to make a realistic, far-reaching, informed decision about the future of its book pages, it needs to know how many people read it, care about it, and they need to know what it means to the community.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 7:02:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:



Chuck said...

I think it's real progress that the AJC editors agreed on Thursday to meet with representatives of book lovers and discuss their book coverage in an open-ended dialogue. We need to offer ideas and alternatives that make sense in today's ever-changing media landscape, lest we become ostrich-like. But let's remember that nothing happens without pressure -- and the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Let's keep thinking about new ideas and approaches that can work, but let's also keep on squeaking out against cutbacks.

9:58 AM

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5/07/2007

In Praise of the LA Times Book Review

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.



I recently visited my old elementary school in Evanston, IL. I spoke to second and third graders about writing,

including the writing I did in that very building, the series of stories about elves who lived in the drainpipe outside my apartment, the poem about wind, the fable about how the kangaroo got its pouch. As I sat on a small chair in a room where I used to sit as a small girl, I was flooded with memories. The waxy, lukewarm cartons of milk. The thick ropes we would climb in gym. The way my class would sit in a circle on the library floor and scratch each others' backs as the librarian read to us. And book reports. Beloved book reports.

I have been an avid reader since I was three. Books have always been central to my life. Many of my classmates groaned when we were assigned book reports, but I was always happy. Book reports gave me a chance to relive the book I had just enjoyed, to figure out what I appreciated about it. I loved when we had to read our book reports out loud in class, because I could learn what other kids were reading, see what titles sparked my interest. Through these book reports, I had a wider sense of possibility as a reader. I also learned how subjective

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taste could be—some of the kids in the class hated books I adored; others found nuances that I hadn't considered. I always felt energized, inspired, after book report day, ready to head to the library or ask my parents to buy me a specific title at Krochs and Brentanos.

Now as an adult, book reviews give me a similar window into the world of the word. They expose me to titles I might not have heard of otherwise. They give me a greater pool to swim in as a reader. They provide that same spark I felt as a child, that desire to race to the library or bookstore and grab a new title. It breaks my heart to see book reviews losing pages, column inches, editors, reviewers at an alarming rate. I worry about the fate of my beloved books. If newspapers are losing readers and then those remaining readers are losing vital information about books, how will the printed word continue to be part of our cultural dialog?

I've lived in Southern California for 21 years; the Los Angeles Times Review of Books has been my weekly touchstone here. I am not a very systematic person, but I have a specific Sunday ritual: I have to read the book section before any other section of the paper. It's very superstitious of me, almost a fetish. I imagine that if I don't read the book section first, the book gods will think I'm not taking my writing seriously and will find a way to smite me. Needless to say, I've invested the Los Angeles Times Review of Books with a lot of power.

It upset me greatly to hear that the book section was losing power within the structure of the L.A. Times. I knew the book gods would not be happy. I knew that readers besides myself would not be happy, either. Nor would other writers who worry about finding an audience.

Of course much of the conversation has shifted online. I love reading lit blogs, but I've found that the more time I spend reading online, the less time I spend reading books. With its endless links, online reading just seems to encourage more online reading. Something about reading book reviews on paper makes me want to reach out to books even more, feel their physical heft in my hands.

I have to admit: the new LA Times Review of Books does have its charms. I kind of like how you have to flip it over to read the Opinion section—it reminds me of a choose your own adventure story, or of coloring books I had as a child, where one half was pictures of, say, airplanes, and if you flipped it over, you could color flowers. The section is less diminished than I feared—it still has several pages of substantial reviews. I do miss the event listings, though (it was always a thrill to see my name there), and worried about Susan Salter Reynolds' Discoveries, those lovely succinct book reports (I was glad to see "Discoveries" back

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[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?](#)

[Writers Read Your Contracts](#)

in yesterday's section). I miss having a distinct, separate section I could obsess about, a section where I could channel all my hopes and fears as both a writer and a reader. It doesn't feel the same now that the section is sharing real estate.

I do have hope for the future of reading, though. At my old elementary school, the students were so excited about books, so excited about their own writing, so excited to meet someone who has fashioned a life around words. As I was leaving, one little boy raised his hand for a high five, and when I returned it, he turned to his friend, his eyes bright, and said "I touched a real author!" May readers continue to be able to touch real authors through the books that carry the true lifeblood of our culture, and may our culture remember that we need coverage of books to keep that lifeblood circulating.--Gayle Brandeis

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:48:00 AM



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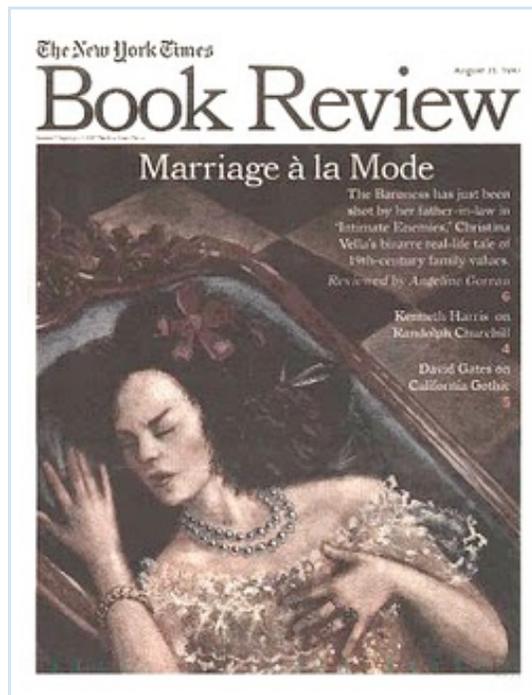
CRITICAL MASS

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5/07/2007

Do Reviews Determine What You Read?



Today, the New York Times film blog put up a post about how "Spiderman 3" and "Wild Hogs" were successes in spite of getting slammed in reviews. It then asked readers to chip in to say how important reviews are in deciding whether they saw a movie. On a similar note, with the knowledge that this blog has as many readers inside the industry as outside of it, how important are reviews in

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helping you decide whether to buy a book? Or for those who don't have to buy books but get them for free, how important are reviews in helping you decide whether to read a book at all?

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 4:39:00 PM



9 COMMENTS:



Ma Titwonky said...

I depend a great deal upon reviews in making decisions about what I'll read or what I'll buy. I subscribe to book magazines (Pages and Bookmarks) for this kind of information, and I often read customer reviews at Amazon. I like the columns

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

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[Bookseller-Turned-Author Lauren Baratz-Logsted on ...](#)

Entertainment Weekly and People Magazine include weekly. Fortunately I know someone who give me People since the book section is the only part of that magazine I read.

I don't necessarily buy or read a book because a specific person said (s)he recommends it. I gather information about the book based on what others say and make my own decisions about whether it's something that will interest me. As a result I very seldom ever buy or read a book I dislike.

5:19 PM

 [Lauren Baratz-Logsted](#) said...

I'm obviously a supporter of book reviews, or I would never have been one of the authors to post in support of the AJC. That said, since you ask how relevant reviews are to readers, I do say I've found them less so as the years have gone by. When I was an independent bookseller, they were my life's blood. Now I still read them, but the urgency is gone and I have to say I can't remember the last time I was driven to a book by a single review. It's more the accumulation of noise I hear around a book and where I hear it from. You know, in a way, litbloggers have been learning from print journalists all their lives. Maybe it's time for print journalists to learn something from those book-lovers who live their lives on the Internet. How are they attracting readers? Why do those readers stay? What content are they providing that's meeting a different need? The WSJ has an article today on newspapers shooting themselves in the foot by giving away too much free content. I don't know, there have to be answers somewhere. In fact, I'm sure there are, if we take the time to look and if we look with open minds.

5:30 PM

 Anonymous said...

I find it interesting that a review of a book in the Sunday NY Times is often much more positive than a review of the same book in the Times week day arts section. Many reviews today sound like marketing instruments and you get the feeling, at least with respect to books from well-known authors, with well-connected publicists, that the reviewers are "bought off" or at least have bought into the hype. As a result, I am more likely to pay attention to a review of a book by an obscure author than of a Cormac McCarthy, a Jonathan Safran Forer etc.

5:46 PM

 [Kristin](#) said...

Sometimes, all I ever read of a book review is the first few paragraphs that tell me what it is about. I live far, far away from any Barnes & Noble-type of store, so just being able to read the basics about a book goes a long way in telling me whether I will like it or not.

Friends' recommendations have been hit and miss...with a lot

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more misses.

Another place I look is the "Recommended Reads" in my local library. They point me to authors I might normally pass over...but if the librarian likes it...?

6:45 PM

 bibliobibili said...

I agree with Lauren Baratz-Logsted's comment *It's more the accumulation of noise I hear around a book and where I hear it from.* I really appreciate the opportunity to read the first few pages of a novel online to get a feel for it.

I go out of my way NOT to read reviews before I've reached my own conclusions about a novel, and then search out all the reviews I can find about it online, and enjoy them greatly.

Reading reviews of non-fiction titles first doesn't seem to take the fun out of it though ...

10:44 PM

 kgs said...

As a librarian (only occasionally involved in book selection), I have learned to rely on book reviews for the books I will never buy, so I can understand the cultural buzz around a title.

When I was a rural library director solely responsible for book selection, the Times reviews were crucial--so important that I photocopied the reviews every week and highlighted/starred the books we were able to buy. But I relied on librarians' selection tools such as Booklist more than I did on the Times, particularly for obvious best-sellers the Times would not deign to review, non-literary titles, and for those wonderful dark horse books that didn't make it out of the NYT's slush pile. In a larger library, my selection choices would have been driven to a large degree by collection profiles designed to predict reader preferences and fill out and balance collections. I too read reviews in Entertainment Weekly and People (and I read the rest of the magazines, too--great guilty pleasures).

As a reader/writer, I read reviews to learn more about reviewers and reviewing, and also, as baratz-logsted said, to discover books beyond the ordinary. No effusive review can make me read Norman Mailer. As a consumer, I pay close attention to word of mouth and Amazon reviews. Litblogs play a small role (Amazon may be more influential, since I can grok a group assessment of a book). Galleycat's meta-buzz around a book is also entertaining, and yet another part of the mix.

Some of my reading is through literary journals, and I don't care what reviewers do or do not think of The Sun or Creative Nonfiction. The disconnect between traditional reviewers and

writers Read your Contracts

Earth to Academia

*Medical Apartheid: Research
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*

Criticism For Sale??

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad
Review*

*Don't Know Much About
Counterinsurgency*

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
Editor, Minneapolis Star
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

litbloggers may be less about print versus online than about the fundamentalism of the book review world (with its inevitable pecking order: Novels by Important People, followed by other novels, short stories, long nonfiction, and somewhere under a rock, essays and other short nonfiction; once a year, someone remembers the poets).

In other words, I rely on everything except the dreaded gift book, which almost always falls wide of the mark. (Why is it that my friends and family know what I wear and what kitchen appliances will make me happy, and even know my taste in movies, but except for specific titles I will probably buy or check out on my own anyway, have no idea what I want to read?)

As an ancillary observation, I wish librarians' tools (catalogs, for example) integrated formal and informal reviews as successfully as do sites such as IMDB.

7:34 AM

 Anonymous said...

In my previous job as a central selector of materials for a mid-size public library system, I relied heavily on reviews to help me decide what to buy for each location. It's easy to get the big names and bestsellers, but how do you select newer authors and interesting titles based solely on a title and perhaps an indicator of how much money the publisher is putting behind the book?

Sigh. I wish I was a reviewer. :)

--Karen in Ohio

9:04 AM

 Anonymous said...

Call me a philistine, but I'm dependent on ratings. How many stars or what letter grade did it get? Sorry, but I usually don't have the patience to read the reviews. And few things are more maddening than reading a review and not knowing whether the book is worth reading or not.

If there's a glowing review of a book, I might take the time to read the review. This morning the NY Times' Michiko Kakutani used the word "stunning" to describe *The Unknown Terrorist* by Richard Flanagan. It was in the first sentence. It was hard to miss. I read the review. The entire review.

1:33 PM

 elizabeth wagoner said...

I need book reviews so much in order to "find" books I might be interested in in this massive media labyrinth (internet, tv, magazines, etc.) that I subscribe to Rain Taxi review of books because, although I read and will locate books from newspaper reviews, I need to read a lot of reviews.

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*
*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

Talking With Chimanda Adichie

*Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
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*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

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Richard Powers

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Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
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Q & A with Kiran Desai

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel
Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*

Without book reviews by professional book reviewers, I am lost in Amazon.com's endless and often meaningless/ irrelevant strings of recommendations.

I cannot rely on the reviews of buyers on bookstore websites, or even on recommendations of friends: I rely on the book reviews of people whose job it is to ferret out great books from the untold number of titles released each year, available online, and especially overlooked titles.

The same principle holds true for needing magazine and musical reviews, as well as film reviews.

The only conceivable reason to cut book reviews from newspapers or other media is to reflect that the public does not read books any longer, an idea I know to be false.

2:42 PM

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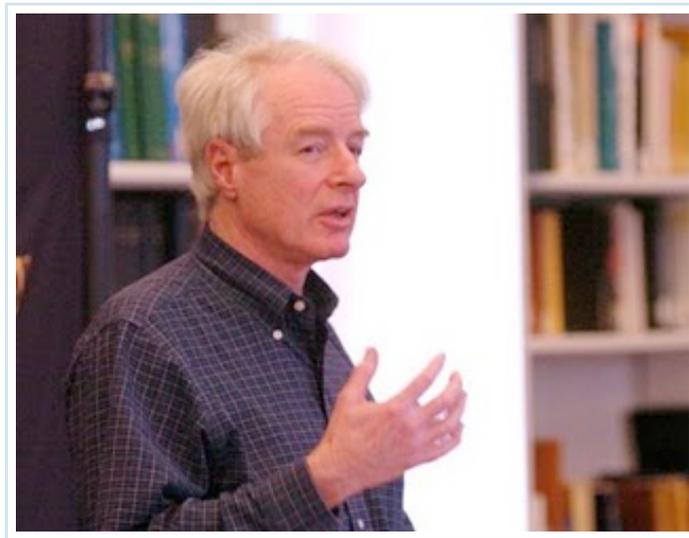
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5/08/2007

Finding a Voice in Book Reviews



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features

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posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, a petition, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

OTHER WRITERS in this space have drawn attention to the vital need for newspaper book coverage because of the cultural importance of books--and all of that is true. But I want to mention another reason why it's so important that a self-respecting newspaper should have an abundance of book reviews. And that is the nurturing of reviewers.

At its best, book reviewing is one of the highest forms of cultural criticism. George Orwell, probably the twentieth century's best essayist, got his start reviewing books for a magazine several years before his first book was published; he continued reviewing books all his life, and we read those reviews still today, long after some of the books he reviewed have been forgotten. In his later years, he himself was literary editor of a newspaper, and gave many younger writers a start by commissioning book reviews from them.

For younger writers today, book reviewing for newspapers remains an

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important way to try your wings as a cultural critic. You learn what your own voice is by the discipline of judging other voices. And you enrich the community of readers by doing so with the guidance of a good editor and enough space to have your say. Personal blogs, unedited Wikipedia entries and MySpace pages are no substitute!

--Adam Hochschild

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:18:00 AM



2 COMMENTS:

 [John Freeman](#) said...

To this list, I'd point out that Virginia Woolf, Saul Bellow, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, V.S. Pritchett, Alan Hollinghurst, Martin Amis, and Colson Whitehead (who actually was a television reviewer, but still in the family) also made their start as reviewers.

9:28 AM

 [Lauren Elkin](#) said...

This is all very well and good, but some of us just starting out have been trying to break into book reviewing and having very little success precisely *because* of the cutbacks in book editors' budgets. It's a very, very tight market right now-- which is why, I'd wager, you have such a disproportionate number of us youngsters resorting to literary blogs and the like.

12:39 PM

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5/08/2007

Maureen McLane on the NBCC Book Furor

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.



The recent furor over several events in the world of book criticism – e.g. the elimination of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's book editor position, the possible cashiering of its editor Teresa Weaver, changes in the LA Times Book Review – raises several questions, even as it raises our collective blood pressure as book critics, impassioned readers, and concerned citizens. Reading the eloquent

posts on this and other sites (by Art Winslow, Nadine Gordimer, Rick Moody, among others), I am brought to ask: Am I truly passionate about books? (As opposed to, say, poems, or essays, or novels, or codexes, or papyri?) And am I committed to book reviews as they now stand? To book reviews sustained by and within newspapers? Is this what I am on the side of? Or is it that “books” and “newspaper book sections” carry something else in them, within them, that I cherish?

Sheer self-interest would seem to dictate that I support book reviews, especially those attached to newspapers. I owe my free-lancing life and critical opportunities to Elizabeth Taylor, Literary Editor of the Chicago Tribune and editor of its books section, to which I began contributing in 1996. Yet I worry about reactive, reflexive proclamations – bordering on ritual incantations – about the ineffable value of Sunday book reviews, the centrality of book culture, the necessity of print book reviews. It is also worth pointing out that the goads for recent NBCC discussions and petitions should be carefully distinguished – the news about the AJC's downgrading of its book section is quite another thing than the news

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*[Finding a Voice in Book Reviews Do Reviews Determine What You Read?](#)
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from (for example) the Chicago Tribune, where the book section will preserve its allotted space as it moves to Saturday; Elizabeth Taylor has worked long, hard, inventively, and successfully to keep book reviews and book-related discussion thriving in her newspaper and in her town, and she also reminds us that the issue here isn't simply one of book reviews but rather the state of newspapers *tout court*. A harsh take on the current situation – a sober realism, from another angle – might yield the following: book reviews are not earning their keep, or are not persuading newspaper publishers that they are earning their keep, and thus if they go, they go the way of the epistolary novel or the feuilleton: fine and important genres that served crucial needs in their time and are now defunct. And besides, as numerous critics have observed, the web seems to be serving interested readers' needs perfectly well, so that if newspaper book sections fold, well, que será, será.

I don't agree with this but I want to play devil's advocate, to sharpen our arguments and to call for a new horizon for making arguments. We need to be making a better case for book reviews and for books per se; or rather, we need to be making several kinds of arguments and offering different kinds of pleasure and challenge. We are giving the game away to number-crunchers, pollsters, and advertising executives. It is time either to meet these folk on their own terms or to make a case for changing the terms. It is striking that most defenders of book reviews and of the literary or civic culture supposedly sustained thereby anchor their defenses in the apparently solid ground of non-fiction: Marie Arana of the Washington Post observed previously on this blog that books on Iraq and on US policy have galvanized discussions of the horrors and malfeasances there. And surely it would be a scandal not to amplify via reviews and other newspaper articles the arguments, evidence, and narratives that nonfiction book authors have mustered in their important, sustained prose works. Daily journalism, crucial though it is especially in a republic that requires informed citizens, works on another temporality; perhaps books are increasingly aspiring to the condition of daily journalism, and this is one reason reviews can seem superfluous – books overly dependent on today's (or yesterday's) news are as obsolete as, well, yesterday's newspaper. Yet books can aim to be both timely and synthetic, and non-fiction works can truly help us "to think what we are doing," as Hannah Arendt put it in "The Human Condition."

But this is not the only ground for defending books and by extension the critical mandate of book reviews: we need not hang our hat only on non-fiction urgency, or on Charlie Rose-able (or Rush Limbaugh-able, or Oprah-able) take-away value when assessing books and the conversations books sustain and enrich. We succumb to a diagnostic myopia if we judge everything by its immediate utility, its capacity to intervene in current debate, its serviceability for talking points – whether at cocktail parties, barbecues, or the Council on Foreign

Review

The Importance of Dialogue

Bookseller-Turned-Author Lauren Baratz-Logsted on ...

Crooked River Ain't Burning Yet

Atlanta Petition Reaches 5000 Signatures

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On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books

The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey

Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey

To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Relations. Years ago Ezra Pound suggested that poets were the antennae of the race. I believe this may be so, but I also believe that reviewers can serve more immediately as antennae for us as citizens, alerting us to what is new, and news, but also reminding us what persists -- how artists, writers, soldiers, bankers, and other thinkers are revolving ongoing questions, ideas, problems, and images; how the questions bearing on us now – how to think about terror? Empire? Democracy? Love? Money? How to imagine the future? What to preserve of the past? – are both age-old questions and completely new in our 21st century moment. Book reviews are the sections in newspapers that link the news to a less perishable context; they mediate between datelines and history, and they sponsor men and women who are living and thinking in time, a slower time perhaps than that of summit meetings, bomb scares, mass shootings, and daily deadlines. All the news that is fit to print includes more than the newest news: it includes the latest bulletins from the thoughtful, slowly pondering philosopher, the long-gestating novelist, the classicist who has finally produced her study of Herodotus, the poet who has reworked Horace for an era of decadent democracy, the sex-radical who has thought long and hard about web-porn and ancient bath-houses, the club-kid who has something to tell us about the new hedonism and the new ethics. These discussions should not be left to bi-weekly, estimable reviews: they should be available in city and suburban and rural newspapers, and they should be an index of what used to be, at least in aspiration, an active, unruly, informed and debating populace.

If newspapers cannot provide this perhaps the web will – a thousand micro-communities may yet bloom. Yet civic culture requires a broader, denser net. Who and what will help us weave it? Do we want it? These seem to me to be the questions – and I am interested in your thoughts. Meanwhile, sign the petitions, and more important, read and identify yourself as a reader of those book sections and newspapers you admire.--Maureen N. McLane, NBCC Board Member and Balakian Award Winner

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:47:00 PM



2 COMMENTS:

Lauren Baratz-Logsted said...

The epistolary novel is dead?

5:31 PM

Anonymous said...

I'm all for saving book reviews; but as a reader and not a

Earth to Academia

*Medical Apartheid: Research
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*

Criticism For Sale??

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad
Review*

*Don't Know Much About
Counterinsurgency*

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
Editor, Minneapolis Star
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

reviewer I am exasperated at print reviews. Take twenty Sunday/Saturday newspapers and say there are eighty reviews. Make a list of the books reviewed. Put a cover over the name of the newspaper. You will find as few as ten books reviewed that day. The same ten books over and over again, sometimes with subtle perspectives. I don't know if it's because the PR people at the big six are pushing the new big books or the reviewers have very little sense of the independent presses. If reviewers want to contribute to civic culture, they should understand that it goes beyond the world of New York publishing and Random House, et al. After weeks and years of the same books being reviewed, recycled, I go to the web reviews and learn about new authors and new works the the greater world of literature. I think while you convince newspapers to retain reviews, and maybe even grow them, you may want to become better at your jobs.

6:08 PM

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5/08/2007

And This, on Today's Leonard Lopate Show on WNYC



[Leonard Lopate's show](#) on the New York City NPR station today focused on critics speaking out. He began with a panel discussion titled "Why Are Book Reviews Disappearing?" (And what does it mean for readers and writers?) NBCC president John Freeman, literary agent [Steve Wasserman](#), the former editor of the Los Angeles Times Book Review, and [Joan Acocella](#), a staff writer for The New Yorker

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weighed in.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:08:00 PM



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5/08/2007

This Just in From the New York Times Syndicate: Discuss

BC-BOOK-REVIEW-SERVICES-ADVISORY-NYT
BOOK AND LITERATURE FEATURES FROM THE NEW YORK
TIMES NEWS SERVICE AND SYNDICATE
ATTENTION MANAGING EDITORS, WIRE EDITORS, FEATURE,
CULTURE AND ONLINE EDITORS: You may have noticed the recent
New York Times article on the economic constraints that are forcing
newspapers, as well as other publications, to cut back on their staff-
produced coverage of books, authors and publishing. Even some wires
services have followed suit.

But as this trend continues, reader interest in books seems to be
growing. Industry figures show increases in adult book buying over the
last two years, with public library usage also on the rise.
In recognition of these conflicting trends, we want to call your attention
to several of our features and services that might help you satisfy your
readers' appetite for book news and reviews -- without breaking your
newsroom budget.

FROM THE TIMES NEWS SERVICE:

- The New York Times Best-Seller Lists, which each week cover
hardcover, paperback, how-to and advice books. Each of these lists is
filed in short and long forms to meet your needs. Once a month, an
additional list of Children's Best-Sellers is included.
- A weekly Noteworthy Paperbacks column, with brief reviews of new
paperback releases.
- Reviews from award-winning critics like Janet Maslin and Michiko
Kakutani from the pages of the Culture section.
- Author interviews, news articles and features on books and the world
of publishing, from both the business and the literary perspectives.
- For clients of the complete New York Times wire, these are included
in your current service and available daily.

FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES SYNDICATE:

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[Maureen McLane on the NBCC](#)

[Book Furor](#)

-- The New York Times Book Review, a weekly feature service that now includes the "Editors' Choice," which lists recently published notable books, and the "TBR: Inside the List" column, which offers brief behind-the-scenes stories about recent best-sellers.

-- The New York Review of Books, considered by many to be the world's leading intellectual journal. In addition to its wealth of literary reviews, it also provides commentary on current events.

-- Podcasts and video, a new dimension to our services that can enrich your Web site. Podcasts include interviews with well-known writers and weekly chats between Sam Tanenhaus, editor of the New York Times Book Review, and authors, editors and critics.

-- We hope you find these suggestions helpful as we all navigate our way through a changing landscape.

-- Laurence M. Paul, Executive Editor, New York Times News Service and Syndicate

-- Michael Oricchio, Managing Editor, New York Times Syndicate.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 11:16:00 PM



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5/09/2007

Around the World in the Campaign for the Book Review



Ex-book critic David Kipen points out that book reviews are journalism's "indicator species. An indicator species is the newt or worm in an ecosystem that nobody much notices

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until it starts to disappear. And even then, who really misses another polliwog -- until six months later when, suddenly, even the buzzards are dead?"

In Pittsburgh, [Bob Hoover takes the lay of the land on this issue](#), from Atlanta to Milwaukee, from Laura Lipman to Richard Ford.

In San Antonio, recent Balakian Award winning critic Steven G. Kellman says that "book reviews can and should offer something more than plot summary and verdict. They form part of the conversation that constitutes a culture. [When that conversation fixates on Paris Hilton and Britney Spears and is silent about William Gass and J.M. Coetzee, that culture is in crisis.](#)"

In Chicago, [Cheryl Reed sends out an S.O.S., while affirming the Sun-Times' coverage will last.](#)

In Raleigh, signing off from a decade of stewarding the book pages at the News & Observer, [Peder Zane gives a shout out to the critics who have worked to him](#), and gives a glimpse of things to come at the News

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

[Art Winslow](#)

[Full blogger bios available here](#)

& Observer.

[The NBCC's petition](#) protesting the decision to cut the book editor position in Atlanta continues toward 6,000 signatures. Among the latest signers: Eric Bogosian, Sara Paratesky, and Mohsin Hamid.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 10:01:00 AM



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5/09/2007

Howard Zinn on Books Reviews, Truth and Democracy

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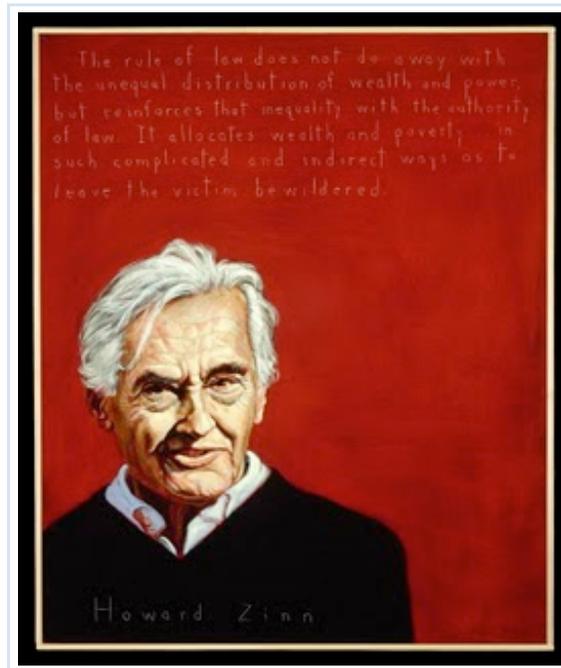
Mary Ann Gwinn

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The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, a petition protesting the removal of the book editor position at the Atlanta Journal Constitution,

and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

Q: As you've probably heard, [there are cutbacks in numerous book sections across the country](#). What do you make of this trend, and is there any period in history when there has been such a reduction in the discussion of books in print?

A: Well, I don't know of any comparable period of American history when there was such a drastic cut back in the attention paid to books, and I think this is the worst it has been. I think it's part of a general tendency on the part of newspapers not to cut back only on reviews, but on foreign news reporting. I was just talking to a Boston Globe reporter who told me that the Globe has shut down its entire foreign news service. And this is true of a number of papers across the country. I think a lot of it has to do with television taking over the attention of people with more attention being paid to visual media – and it's not a good thing at all.

Jennifer Reese

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[Maureen McLane on the NBCC Book Furor](#)

Q: If you talk to newspaper owners, some of them will say there is more talk about books on the internet and in other forums, and that newspapers just can't compete in this arena anymore. That people will find book coverage elsewhere. Do you believe this?

A: Well, they have to hunt for it – newspaper editors are putting greater responsibility on the individual to find information which we normally would get in our daily newspaper. After all, there are still a lot of people who don't have computers, and are totally dependent on newspaper, so for those people simply telling me that to go and get information on the internet doesn't help. So I think these cutbacks are unfortunately part of the dumbing down of the American public, which is supposed to be a highly educated public...and the cutback of book reviews sections and book reviews makes things worse, after all democracy depends on information, it depends on the public being informed, and the inattention to books, the diminished attention to books, is important because books are probably the least censored part of our culture. That is, while television and radio have been more and more monopolized, and newspapers are more and more concentrated in fewer hands, I have found as a writer that there has been more freedom in book publishing than in any other aspect of American culture – this in spite of the fact that publishing itself has been taken over financial and industrial moguls, like my own publisher, HarperCollins, which was taken over by Rupert Murdoch. But I think it is still true that books are the freest area. So when people ask me for sources of information, I tell them go to the library, go to the bookstore, because I think books are the last refuge from the lies and misinterpretations that are pushed down upon people.

Q: But I guess we have a problem here, because if books are written of less and less, and not everyone has a connection to the internet. How do people know a book exists? I tried to find a review of your latest book, "[A Power Governments Cannot Suppress](#)," and aside from websites like [Alternet](#), which were running excerpts, and the Los Angeles Times (which isn't online yet), I couldn't find one.

A: No, you're right. There have been reviews in very tiny publications, but no -- no reviews in major newspapers.

Q: Was it like that when you first began to publish?

A: Well it's always been harder for an unorthodox, or you could say dissident writers to get reviews. But my earlier books did get reviewed a lot more often, and in many more places than my present books. I'm thinking also of -- and comparing reviews during the Vietnam War era and reviews during the Iraq War. In 1967 I wrote a book called [Vietnam: the Logic of Withdrawal](#), and it was reviewed in many major newspapers...Just recently Anthony Arnove wrote [Iraq: the logic of Withdrawal](#), and so far as I can see it has received very few or no

Finding a Voice in Book Reviews
Do Reviews Determine What You Read?
In Praise of the LA Times Book Review
The Importance of Dialogue
Bookseller-Turned-Author Lauren Baratz-Logsted on ...
Crooked River Ain't Burning Yet

Past Posts Of Note

Reviewing 101: John Updike's Rules, which he admits breaking.
Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future
The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing
George Orwell on Book Reviews
Why Book Reviews Matter
The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30 Books in 30 Days
How We Choose Links for Roundup
What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?
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reviews in major newspapers. If you compare two books on similar situations, what has happened in 40 years – it's disheartening.

Q: So what should people do who care about this form of dialogue?

A: I wish I knew what the answer was to this question, because the only reply one can give in a situation like this is for people to seek out [alternate sources](#) of information, alternate [newspapers](#), community [newspapers](#), community radio, cable [television](#).

But I also would suggest that people start campaigns to restore attention to book reviewing in those newspapers that have cut down on book reviewing. Presumably editors are somewhat sensitive to reader reactions. I think if readers didn't simply accept these cuts passively, and they carried campaigns asking that newspapers restore the space and the attention to books, well, that would be one way to fight.

Q: Actually, the NBCC started a campaign just like that in Atlanta, where [the book editor position was eliminated](#). With local [readers](#) and [booksellers](#) we [petitioned the paper](#) and [met with the editor](#), Julia Wallace. We have a petition going that has over 5,000 signatures online and more at local bookstores.

A: Well I think what you just described and would be a valuable thing to do – in newspapers all across the country.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 10:22:00 AM  

2 COMMENTS:

 Anonymous said...

"...when people ask me for sources of information I tell them go to the library." Yes, thankyou Mr. Zinn. More book reviews everywhere and LIBRARIES. See the new project to Rebuild the Public Libraries of New Orleans at www.beatitudesinneworleans.blogspot.com and join The Beatitudes Network. More LIBRARIES AND MORE REVIEWS.
Lyn Lejeune

11:40 AM

 Rayyan said...

My review of Howard Zinn's "A Power Governments Cannot Suppress" was published in the Chicago Sun-Times on February 11.

Below are two links to the review, which is a bit difficult to access because it has apparently been archived.

Rayyan Al-Shawaf

[Criticism For Sale??](#)

[No Buzz Marketing or Amazon
Paybacks](#)

[What to do with review copies?
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[Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
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9:20 AM

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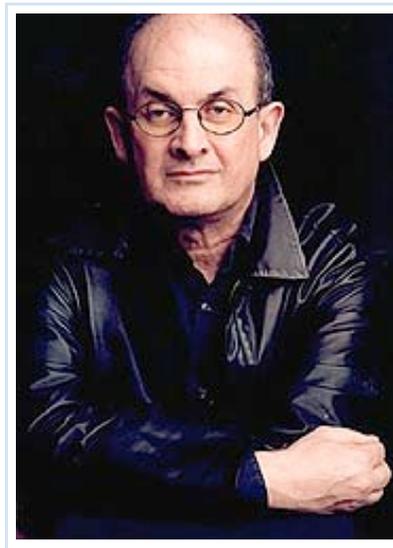
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5/09/2007

Salman Rushdie on the Colbert Report



Tune into the [Colbert Report on Comedy Central](#) tonight at 11:30, 10:30 c., as [Salman Rushdie](#) will be talking to Stephen Colbert about -- among other things -- what's happening in America with book reviews, and why people like Stephen should care. After all, when Colbert reads a newspaper, [he doesn't read the words -- he just absorbs the truth.](#)

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Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 3:00:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

[Lauren Baratz-Logsted](#) said...

Thanks for the tip; I did not know this - will force myself to stay up. I have noticed though lately, that there seem to be a dearth of women authors on these shows, particularly Jon Stewart. Don't women write interesting things???

10:27 PM

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5/10/2007

Vermont College MFA Program Students/Alumni Weigh in On Book Reviews



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of the campaign's [blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. NBCC member and [author Abby Frucht](#) asked students and alumni at the [Vermont College MFA in Writing Program](#), where she has been a mentor and advisor for thirteen years, to write about the value of book reviews in their lives in the wake of the ongoing cutting of book pages. Here is her report:

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Maureen McLane

What interested me most as I read what they sent is how many of them DO look to book reviews for discussion, affirmation, and revelation of cultural, moral, and social news. Recent VC graduate Wayne Lindeman writes that “(w)ith general conversations about...literature diminishing in our society ...serious reviews of literary novels help remind me of the ways in which a work can, and should, play out in the cultural arena as social conscience and meaningful art.” Novelist Brian Yansky writes, “We need book reviews to remind us that there is a culture that extends beyond Snoop Dog and the Super Bowl. Book Reviews are like libraries: they provide a place to pause and consider the ideas and stories that shape our world.” Editor and poet Michael Macklin writes, “This is not about litspeak, but rather about those who take the time to spread the word about work we find that has somehow changed us, that has had a real impact on our lives. It is about keeping the word alive that speaks to peace and hope and beauty.”

“If books teach us how to live, then book reviews teach us how to live well,” writes MFA student Dain Fedora. [Patricia Spears Jones](#), author of two volumes of poetry, adds, “We are at a deeply critical moment in America - where our ideas and ideals are being manipulated and progressive thinking is under assault. How we as writers and thinkers respond to these times is as important as how writers and thinkers responded to the jazz age or the depression or McCarthivism. The

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

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[Art Winslow](#)

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...response to the passage of the depression of necessity, and the essays, reviews and commentary in a range of newspapers give us a powerful insight into how these ideas were viewed back in the day - do we want to have the current ideas, ideals, and literary struggles erased?"

Many of those who responded to my query focused on the value of reading and on the importance of reviews in their personal and professional lives: MFA student Jason Wandrei writes, "It is clear that other, harder news, such as where celebrities have recently passed out drunk, eclipses the importance of achievements in the field of literature, but rather than supplanting the book review sections of papers, perhaps there is room for both this hardball journalism as well as book reviews."

Bookstore owner Nan Wigington finds that reading is "my religion, my way of reconnecting with a disconnected humanity. The Sunday Denver Post book review page isn't exactly my reading bible, but it is a good wayside pulpit. It lets me know what the new sermons are. Blogs can't replace the printed review page. They are like shouts from the street, sometimes angry, sometimes thoughtful, but often hard to listen to."

Recent graduate Janice Stridick, who especially loves "reading the book reviews on Salon.com," relies on reviews "to keep me abreast of the important topics of the day" and to "represent the depth and diversity of our culture."

"One of my favorite websites is [www.librarything.com](#), where there are active dialogues on various books," writes fiction writer Nadine Sarreal, who lives in Singapore and dips into numerous online sites for "news in the literary world... When I get on a plane...I take the International Herald Tribune precisely because I check the book review page. In the past year, I've bought at least three books because my husband clipped a review from the Singapore Straits Times and tucked it into my wallet. Two Monday columns I enjoy in the Philippine Star are Krip Uson's 'Kripokin' and Butch Dalisay's 'Penman.'"

"It is sad indeed that today we can get a fuller breadth of information about new books from Amazon.com...than we can from our print media. The merchants have taken over a function that should be in the hands of an independent medium," writes Betty Cotter. Pushcart nominee Maggie Kast writes that she gave her Blue Ridge Mountains sister a subscription to the New York Times Book Review. Why? "It gave her a window on the wider world. For me, reviews are part of the continuing dialogue among readers that takes off from a book, keeps it alive and feeds back into new writing."

Creative nonfiction graduate [Nathalie Dupree](#) writes, "Many years ago I read a review of 'Master and Commander.' I was an unlikely reader for this book. I don't sail, don't like books with no women of consequence in them. One line ...caught me. I ended up reading the entire series by this author, becoming deeply entrenched in the writing, the historical

*Around the World in the Campaign
for the Book Revi...*

*This Just in From the New York
Times Syndicate: Di...*

*And This, on Today's Leonard
Lopate Show on WNYC*

*Maureen McLane on the NBCC
Book Furor*

Finding a Voice in Book Reviews

*Do Reviews Determine What You
Read?*

*In Praise of the LA Times Book
Review*

The Importance of Dialogue

Past Posts Of Note

*Reviewing 101: John Updike's
Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
routine, and feeling glum about
the future*

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Book Reviewing*

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30
Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for
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*What's Graphic and What's a
Novel and who's trying to ban
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June*

references, and the characters. A book review changed my style of reading, my style of writing, and my style of research.”

Author Alexandra Chasin reads book reviews “because they provide me with a continuing education, allowing me glimpses of developments in fields in which I am not expert.” For Poetry graduate Michelle Demers, “reviews provide a broadening perspective that allows me to see beyond my own scope of experience. In addition, as a teacher of college writing classes, I use reviews as models of analytical thinking.”

Another writing teacher, [Lauren Rusk](#), who since graduating in poetry has published poems, essays, and criticism, warns, “At Stanford University, my born-in-the-USA students write with the same odd usages as my nonnative speakers, and very few students follow their thoughts through logically on paper, presumably because they read fewer and fewer books. If yet another medium stops suggesting that books are exciting, what then? And what of Sunday mornings with the book review, surrounded by possible worlds to enter?”

Not all of my respondents are so keen on book reviews. First semester student [Steven Axelrod](#) sympathizes with his friends “who have become impatient with” what he laments as “the outright mendacity...and casual bad habits of criticism. For example, the classic back-handed dismissal. It’s a marginal smackdown that requires no evidence or justification, since it’s stuck somewhere in the corner of a dependent clause in a sentence that’s discussing something else. ‘Mr. A’s brilliantly evocative descriptions of the Amazonian jungle--so unlike Mr. B’s sterile urban street scenes--seem to anchor the character’s passions etc.’ You read that and you say, ‘Wait a second! How did Mr. B get in there? Which street scenes are you talking about? Sterile in what way? Define your terms!’ There’s no excuse for this kind of lazy cheating. If standards were more rigorous, readership (and review pages) wouldn’t be shrinking.”

“Oh the days of the thick, juicy New York Times Book Review,” writes poet/memoirist [Joan Seliger Sidney](#), “when the newly published extraordinary poet could still dream of seeing her/his book praised or even panned, instead of passed over... Today, so few pages, so little diversity, no poetry.”

Poetry student Melody Berning calls reviews “my indirect muse, connecting me to small press books and especially works by lesbian/feminist and alternative gender communities.” Patricia McMillen says of the one review garnered by her chapbook of poems, “I do feel that it has affirmed and encouraged me greatly to have a second set of eyes (aside from the publisher) read my work and respond publicly to it.” Novelist [Lisa Lenard-Cook](#), who was short-listed for the PEN Southwestern Book Award, knows “all too well that a lack of reviews can doom a book...before it’s even published.”

[Ann Robinson](#), who has published a collection of short stories since

06 Archive
Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?
Writers Read Your Contracts
Earth to Academia
Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics
Criticism For Sale??
No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks
What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.
The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review
Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine
Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly
Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter
Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer
M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder
Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune
Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel
Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic
Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post
Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist
Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle
Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

graduating in 1997, concludes, "Who can exist without them? Not I. So there."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:52:00 AM



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5/10/2007

"Do we need 350,000 books a year...except for a bonfire?"

If you missed Salman Rushdie's appearance on *The Colbert Report* last night, go to the show's [most recent video box](#) and scroll down to -- surprise -- "Salman Rushdie."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY LIZZIE SKURNICK 10:57:00 AM



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1 COMMENTS:

 [grackyfrog](#) said...

really enjoyed the salman rushdie interview... thank you for posting the link.

12:18 PM

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5/10/2007

Rushdie vs. Colbert: The Book Section Beatdown

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POSTED BY DAVID ORR 1:32:00 PM



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5/10/2007

A Conversation with Sheila Kohler on Book Reviews



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book

sections and book culture matter. NBCC member Heller McAlpin spoke with fiction writer [Sheila Kohler](#) about her reactions to the change in book reviews.

Q. As a writer of literary fiction, how important have newspaper reviews of your work been to you? Do you read reviews of your work? Have you ever learned from them?

A. Reviews are extremely important to me as a writer. They are what lets the public know about our books. Without them I don't really see how books could survive. I always read them--even the bad ones, and certainly I have learned from them, if only that different, qualified people have very different ideas about my work.

Q. Does your work get reviewed/discussed much on literary blogs? If so, how do those reviews compare with print reviews of your books?

A. Occasionally someone may mention my books in a blog. I believe the dangers of this indiscriminate reporting on books is that people who have no knowledge of literature can air their views as though they were of value and may influence readers. Critics may not always be right, of course, but at least they have read and studied literature, the great books, and have some outside knowledge to refer to when critiquing our work.

Q. What are your thoughts on what's happening to critical discourse in this country's newspapers?

A. I'm appalled that the review pages are being cut. It means that books are no longer to be taken seriously. What will happen to our children and our children's children without this essential means of getting to

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know others and themselves?--[Heller McAlpin](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:15:00 PM



10 COMMENTS:

[Dan Wickett](#) said...

Interesting. "... different QUALIFIED (my emphasis) people have very different views..." but "... people who have NO KNOWLEDGE (again, my emphasis) of literature can air their views as though they were of value and may influence readers."

So, the only ones who SHOULD influence readers are those who are qualified, having "read and studied literature, the great books," etc. Even though, having done so, they may completely disagree with another qualified individual, thus crossing out the initial qualified individual's influence.

Then there's that other damn confusion when those who are not qualified become qualified due to outside sources, say the Philadelphia Inquirer, or L.A. Times, or Baltimore Sun, etc. giving them credence by soliciting their services in the form of a written review of a book or two. But then what do I, as a reader, do when I see their blogs? Are they still qualified? Or is it only when I see their byline in print?

Oh wait, that's right. Good thing I have a brain and can spend a few minutes actually reading the "indiscriminate reporting on books" by an individual and make my own determination (though, unqualified at that, not having taken more than four or five literature classes in my life) as to whether or not I, again as a reader, find them qualified to my own personal tastes.

Defensive? Probably moreso than necessary, but as a blogger who has stated again and again that I think print reviews are necessary, I'm amazed at the continuous ridiculous blanket statements being made. I mean, I think there are some disastrous NBCC members in terms of their reviews. And there are certainly a few book pages that are on the verge of embarrassing - but I would NEVER make a blanket statement based on those few that claimed anything close to "Critics may not always be right, of course, but at least they have read and studied literature, the great books, and have some outside knowledge to refer to when critiquing our work."

1:07 AM

Anonymous said...

Regarding blogs that review or mention books...It's a shame that Sheila Kohler has the attitude that there is a "danger" in blogs

Vermont College MFA Program
Students/Alumni Weigh ...

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Report

Howard Zinn on Books Reviews,
Truth and Democracy

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This Just in From the New York
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And This, on Today's Leonard
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indiscriminately reporting on books. While a thoughtful review is always nice, first and foremost it is the mention of the book itself--whether in a newspaper, magazine, on the radio or television or, indeed, on a blog or website--that is most important. It allows the book to become known in a very crowded marketplace.

Also, if a person reads a book and enjoys it or dislikes it isn't that person entitled to an opinion even if he or she doesn't have a PhD in literature or extensive experience as a reviewer? And shouldn't that person be allowed to express his or her opinion (good or bad) to others who are interested in hearing it?

It's unfortunate when authors have such elitist attitudes. It doesn't do the book business any favors, and it only alienates more people.

10:22 AM

 Gloria Spates said...

I think as long as book reviews are positive, mature and written with prospective, even if a critic doesn't think the book is all that great, that will make a significant difference in what we get out of reviews. I have found some negative criticism and immature reviews by some critics, for instance; rambling on with a bunch of mambo jumbo. These are major things that turn me off. And I think that as long as a book review is written in prospective, language is to the point, word choices are entertaining, that will make reviews more meaningful.

11:54 AM

 David J. Montgomery said...

How statements like those made in this interview are going to help the cause of the NBCC is beyond me.

1:23 PM

 grackyfrogg said...

i definitely take issue with kohler's implication that the only views of any "value" are those of the qualified experts.

look, if the goal of book reviews is to get lots of people talking about books--including "unqualified" people--well and good; i'm all for them. and i would hope that there is room for both online reviews (yes, including blogs) and print reviews in this sphere. if, however, the purpose of book reviews is only to spark conversations at some intellectually elite level, with the trickle-down effect of just making sure the poor unliterary proles at the bottom do nothing beyond forking over the cash for the books that have been reviewed while keeping their indiscriminate mouths shut (unless they can echo the thoroughly expert opinions found in print reviews!), then i can't really get onboard.

i'm willing to give kohler the benefit of the doubt that she didn't

Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

mean anything so ludicrous by her statement. still, implications can trump the best intentions!

2:56 PM

 **Rebecca Skloot** said...

Many people have commented here and emailed me privately, complaining about Sheila's statements about litblogs ... Just to remind everyone: All opinions posted here are the poster's. They're not those of the NBCC or the Critical Mass bloggers as a whole. We invite a huge range of people to contribute here, and with that, we get a huge range of opinions. Our attitude about posts is the same as our attitude about comments: We don't censor them. If someone we invite to post here has something negative to say about litblogs, we'll post it just like we approve comments critical of print reviews or the NBCC.

Personally, I agree with some of the complaints I've been hearing about the anti-blog sentiment in this post. As anyone who's a regular Critical Mass reader knows, I'm a huge fan of lit blogs (which is why I started this one in the first place), and I think the whole print vs. litblog thing is pointless.

The way I see it, complaining about lit blogs is akin to complaining about the advent of the telephone, the internet, the BlackBerry ... technology advances and brings with it many wonderful opportunities. And plenty of headaches. What you get from it depends on what you put into it, how open you are to change, and how willing you are to work around the headaches (it's true, there are many mediocre and bad blogs out there, but that doesn't mean they're all bad. Far from it, actually). Litblogs offer an endless new platform for talking about books, sharing books, keeping books alive ... That's a good thing.

12:15 PM

 **Barking Kitten** said...

Ms. Kohler: I have a Master's Degree in literature. I have studied the "great books." This doesn't make me any smarter than Mr. Wickett, or Ed Champion, or any of the other passionately committed readers blogging out here in the 'sphere.

Rebecca: Amen! Our society is divided enough without lovers of books engaging in infighting.

4:47 PM

 **morgan** said...

I've just [posted](#) about this. I've communicated with Sheila Kohler about how people are reacting to her dismissive words about blogs. She said that she hadn't meant to offend people, can see how her choice of words was unfortunate and has great deal of respect for many bloggers.

8:09 PM

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly
Frank Wilson, Book Editor, Philadelphia Inquirer
Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic, Entertainment Weekly
Carole Goldberg, Book Editor, Hartford Courant

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

Convergences With NBCC Winner Lawrence Weschler
A Conversation With NBCC Winner Julie Phillips
A Conversation With Barbara J. King
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Moshin Hamid on Camus, Immigration, and Love
An Interview With Melissa Fay Green
Wole Soyinka on Becoming an Activist
Dick Adler on the Best Books of 2006
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Robley Wilson on What He's Reading
Elizabeth Evans on What She's Reading
T. Christian Miller On War Profiteering, part 1 and part 2
Q & A with Kiran Desai
Eliot Weinberger on Eating Intestines in China
William T. Vollmann on Doing Drugs as Research
Caroline Moorehead on Martha Gellhorn
Kiran Desai on Home and Different Cultures and Developing Characters

 [dovegreyreader](#) said...

Can't wait to read some of her books but sadly never heard of here in the UK and seems likely to stay that way because blogs have become the very best way to get your books known these days. Cheapest marketing and PR strategy ever invented, I don't hear the publishers crying over it all.

3:19 PM

 Anonymous said...

While studying Computer Engineering at University I came across staggering data and statistics regarding minorities, graduation rates and access to books. In today's high tech media environment, all people, young people especially need to be encouraged to read physical books. When I had my first child I was disappointed at the high price of used books for children in my area. As I searched for a cost effective way to locate books I ran across this company: www.booksliquidation.com. They offer wholesale prices on boxes to truckloads of used books (by genre) at very reasonable shipping rates throughout the US and abroad. For instance, at less than \$50 a family can receive around 100 good condition kids books including shipping. Most books are like new condition and priced lower than books found at Goodwill or any used book store. The price of books is definitely one factor not talked about when promoting reading. Access to quality books at a price anyone can afford will most assuredly eliminate one barrier in regards to young people's ability to read. Statistics show that the average high-school graduate has(had) a minimum 50 books available to them to read in their homes. Those going on to post elementary education had at least 100 books in their homes. Books are expensive! Booksliquidation.com is one company that is assisting families in their effort to create a rich at-home reading environment for their children and their personal reference.

5:54 AM

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Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's
Working On

Tom Bissell: What He's Working
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Jonathan Lethem: What He's
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Don DeLillo on Actors and Death
Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching
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Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory

John Updike on Michiko Kakutani

Mary Karr on Roth and Updike
and "Blood Meridian"

Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"

Andrew Sean Greer on "The
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier
and Clay"

Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books

John Irving on John Irving

Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"

Stewart O'Nan on "The Things
They Carried

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischek

Jason Berry Part I

Jason Berry Part II

Susan Larson

Jason Berry (Part I)

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5/11/2007

The Sunday Morning Ritual



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned

writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter

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James Marcus

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Weekend mornings used to be a real event. I would grind and brew my shade-grown coffee and spread the Dallas Morning News on the couch in front of me. After checking the sports page, I'd scout the book reviews, scissors in hand, clipping the intriguing ones (remember snipping coupons with your mother?) and stashing them in a folder. Next time I was online or in a bookstore, my folder would guide my purchases. Yet, as mainstream newspapers trim what they consider the "extras"--information outside the "hard news" of politics and accidents--they are jeopardizing my quiet routine, and one of the only real pleasures left in this electronic age.

Perhaps the gradual disappearance of book reviews also speaks to the book's endangered status in our culture. Though I associate reading reviews with the leisure of Sundays, with the scent of coffee, with something vast and inky in my hands, nowadays I resign myself to reading reviews primarily on a cold computer screen. Amazon.com conveniently tracks my purchases and recommends "similar" books

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based on how I've spent my money.

While Amazon suggests books it "thinks" I'll like, newspaper book reviews introduce me to books off my radar, books I wouldn't encounter otherwise. Print book reviews also offer the authority, depth, and substance that online reviews often lack. So can't I have my old Sundays back? I can't cuddle up with my computer the same way I can with a newspaper—or with a book, for that matter.

--[Kristen Keckler](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 11:24:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

 Flossie T said...

Saturday morning ritual for me: the Saturday Guardian Review section with coffee and croissants. Irreplaceable.

5:50 PM

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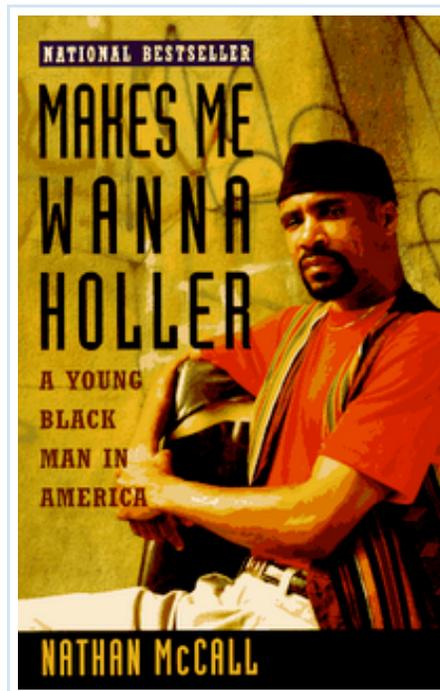
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5/11/2007

A Critical Mass of Writers Mobilizes on Atlanta



As the NBCC's [petition to protest the AJC's removal of the book editor job](#) nears 6,000 signatories, and readers, local booksellers, and AJC subscribers continue to express their support for literary coverage in Atlanta, writers continue to show their support. Here are a few of their names:

Norman Rush, Norman Mailer, Salman Rushdie, Monica Ali, Harlan Ellison, Richard Ford, Richard Powers, Dennis Cooper (pictured above), Gish Jen, David Lodge, Anne Applebaum,

Yann Martel, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jack Miles, Nathan McCall (pictured above) Sara Paretsky, Tracy Kidder, Julia Glass, Steve Yarbrough, Judith Thurman, Fay Weldon, Colm Toibin, Mohsin Hamid, Norris Church Mailer, David Mitchell, Reynolds Price, Allan Gurganus, Kim Addonizio, Chris Abani, Judith Freeman, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Hisham Matar, Clay Risen, Nicholas Christopher, Andrew Hudgins, Naemm Murr, Ben Fountain, Ken Foster, Melissa Bank, Erik Reese, Hester Kaplan, Denise Hamilton, Audrey Niffenberger, Kathryn Harrison, Louis D. Rubin, Adam Braver, Don Lee, Julie Otsuka, George Garrett, Chase Twichell, Anne Fadiman, George Saunders, Kevin Young, Gary Shteyngart, Michael Connelly, Karin Slaughter, George Pelecanos, Ian Rankin, Adam Haslett, Ali Smith, Stuart Kelly, Andrew O'Hagan. Ariel Dorfman, Bobbie Ann Mason, Connie May Fowler, Jim Dwyer, Anthony Swofford, Larry Dark, Craig Unger, Whitney Terrell, Maureen Corrigan, Chimamanda Adichie, Allan Kornblum, Emily Barton, David Anthony Durham, Michael Upchurch, Marisa Silver, Cathleen Schine, Christopher Coake, Sean Wilsey, Karen Bender, Pam

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Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 2:05:00 PM



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5/11/2007

Crime & Mystery Writers Supporting Reviews



ONE OF THE THINGS you might notice about [the list of writers](#) who have signed the [petition](#) protesting the cutting of the book editor position at the Atlanta Journal Constitution is the huge contingent of crime and mystery writers. There's Michael Connelly and Atlanta area author Karin Slaughter, Denis Lehane and George Pelcanos, James Lee Burke (pictured left) his daughter, Alafair Burke, Denise Hamilton, Ian Rankin, Laura Lippman, and many others.

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In his [editorial several two weeks back in the Los Angeles Times](#), Connelly talked about the support he received from early reviews, and wondered where Harry Bosch would be in today's reviewing environment. It was an interesting point -- since one of the internet's strongest features is the large number of free, easy-to access, virtual gathering places for active specialized fan bases which have sprung up. If you want it to be so, every week can be Edgar Week online, or Bouchercon, for that matter, given how much material is out there. No doubt if Connelly debuted today, these websites would notice.

And yet -- one of the points this campaign is trying to make is that, in addition to these active, sometimes intelligently conducted salons for enthusiasts and fans, which are great additions to the critical dialogue, we need *bigger tent discussions* as well. With book stores carved up into smaller and smaller genre fields, from chick lit to lad lit to graphic novels and so on, it's important that there's a place where books by

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writers, regardless of their genre, can be reviewed in front of a large audience by critics who have experience in the field.

That's somethings newspaper book sections -- which reach hundreds of thousands of readers, millions upon millions if you add up all the papers in the country -- have provided and should continue to provide. Until every American, regardless of geographical location or income level, enjoys their own broadband connection, these newspaper sections, be it the LA Times or the AJC, will continue to play a vital role in bringing these stories before readers. I think when Connelly worried about the future Harry Bosches of the world, that's what he was talking about: newspapers' unparalleled ability to reach the reader who just wants a well told-story, and perhaps finds it by accident on her way to the sports section.

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 4:35:00 PM



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5/13/2007

NBCC Announces Three BEA Panels on the Book Review

IN JUST UNDER THREE WEEKS, [Book Expo America](#) will come to New York. In keeping with the Campaign to Save Book Reviews, the NBCC will be hosting three book reviewing panels at the fair which touch on a variety of the issues raised by the changes in book coverage and book culture.

THE INTELLECTUAL HISTORY OF THE BOOK REVIEW: A Bookforum Event

Thursday, May 31st, Paula Cooper Gallery, 521 West 21st Street, 4:30 PM- 5:30 PM

Where did the book review come from? What form has it taken? Who has read it and what purpose has it served in American arts and letters? Join Bookforum editor and NBCC member Eric Banks for a multi-faceted look at the genealogy of the popular book review. Panelists include James Shapiro, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University; Joyce Carol Oates, National Book Award winning novelist and critic; Lindsay Waters, Executive Editor for the Humanities, Harvard University Press; Jonathan Galassi, president and publisher, Farrar, Straus & Giroux.

RSVP required (nbccrsvp@hotmail.com)

ETHICS IN BOOK REVIEWING: The More Things Change.....

Friday, June 1, Javits Center, Room 1E06, 11:30 AM - 12:30 PM

NBCC board member and Philadelphia Inquirer literary critic Carlin Romano will moderate what promises to be a lively discussion on the practice and ethics of book reviewing, drawing from results of a newly updated NBCC survey of hundreds of working book critics. Panelists will include Sam Tanenhaus, editor of the New York Times Book Review; Christopher Hitchens, author and critic; Francine Prose, author, critic and president of PEN America Center; David L. Ulin,

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**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 1:55:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

Anonymous said...

And over at Galleycat, there appears the news that the powers that be at the New York Times, who've obviously read that paper's article about the AJC events, are now informing the dailies of the nation that the Times' book reviews are now available for syndication to interested parties. At a very reasonable price.

I don't think anybody from the Times signed the petition. If so at least you can say they're not hypocritical.

I wonder who will address this issue at the panels. Maybe John Leonard. Of all the NYTBR editors he was the one least inclined to kowtow to management.

12:07 PM

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5/14/2007

A Conversation with Ibtisam Barakat



Ibtisam Barakat, who lives in Columbia, Missouri, is the author of the memoir "Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood," published earlier this spring by Farrar, Straus and Giroux. NBCC intern Melody Ann Adams of the University of Missouri, who is just wrapping up her internship this week, asked her a few questions. Melody will be interning this summer at [The Missouri Review](#). Next year, her final

year, she will be an editor at Vox (Mizzou's magazine) for the first semester. Thanks to NBCC board member and Mizzou prof Steve Weinberg for making her internship possible.

Q: Your memoir describes your journey as a Palestinian refugee in the aftermath of the Six Day War in 1967, yet the book is geared toward young adults. Why did you decide to write for a younger audience instead of an older audience who would be able to remember some of the events of the time?

A: The voice that narrates "Tasting the Sky" is a young person's voice because that allows the story its original authenticity and immediacy. I was a young person when that set of events took place. It did not even occur to me to find another voice for this memoir. Perhaps because empowering the voices of young people is a passion for me. I think that a large number of children in the world experience war and other atrocities that they have no choice in, and we hear very little about their

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experiences, especially directly from them. So I felt that I had an opportunity to be a strong ally to the child's voice in myself, and a strong ally to children in general. I think that a story well-told has no real limits to its readership.

Q: When did you first realize that you wanted to share your life experiences and write a memoir?

A: When I noticed that the Palestinians are often talked about in the media but are not talked with as often. I saw that the reference to Palestinians seemed to be devoid of emphasis on culture, literature, art and the creative and elements of life that truly tell the human story of a people. So I wanted to contribute to building a Palestinian narrative that is strongly anchored in the literary expression because literature has a genuine potential to be a richly unifying experience. It can lead us toward building a world culture of expanded understanding, empathy and inclusion.

Q: There's a scene from your book: "When a war ends it does not go away," my mother says. "It hides inside us...Just forget!" "But I do not want to do what Mother says...I want to remember." What do you hope today's generation will remember about the war on terror?

A: I hope that all people, not just today's generation, will arrive at an understanding that the very expression "war on terror" is rooted in a war mindset. It cannot produce peace. Indeed it adds to the terror and the misconception that the way to achieve safety is through war. I think what is needed is a large number of creative initiatives to address the root causes for strife in the world. Subduing whole countries and peoples cannot be a sustainable and lasting strategy for peace.

War creates wounds that last for generations. I think that one small percentage of a war budget turned to building friendships and understanding will achieve more safety and peace in the world than any war can. And there is a strong link between human rights violations, racial exclusion and oppression, imbalance of military and economic power in the world, and terrorism. The manipulation of words also adds to the confusion.

But ultimately, I think that what people all over the world crave is a sense of respect, kindness and creative possibility. War seems to destroy these gentle elements in life.

Q: You've lived in the U.S. since 1986. Where do you feel most at home?

A: In a sense I don't feel at home anywhere, and I can feel home everywhere. It's primarily conditional. The concept of home is an

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Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June*

idealistic concept with the assumption that home provides safety, rest, peace, belonging, and all the wholesome values a person or a society aspires to have. And generally the concept of home largely refers to a state of being with people who are culturally similar to us, therefore we can avoid the experience of strife and adversity of being misunderstood or discriminated against by those "not similar to us." I do not have such experience except in islands of time. And more and more I see that many people do not feel at home, even while living in their homelands. In a broad sense, however, language is my home. And I feel that the human heart can extend itself to embrace everyone and end the violence that leaves us homeless--be it due to wars, occupation or forced separations. I have a poem entitled "Tea Invitation" that starts with these lines:

I write

for my heart

has become a country,

and I want all people

To live in it.

Q: What was it like to serve as a delegate to the third U.N . World Conference for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination?

A: It was one of the most memorable experiences for me, and the antithesis of the sense of isolation from the globe that is sometimes present in US life and culture.

What I will always remember from that experience is being at the stadium where the conference was being held and looking behind me. I saw people with every skin color, eye shape, and hairstyle, and wearing a variety of traditional clothing. The number of languages spoken reflected the endlessness of thoughts. They all sat so close to each other. Ever since that time, that's the image I think of when I need to think about audience or about the possibility of closeness between peoples in the world. It moves me beyond the illusion that the world is dominated by any one group, language, or view of life.

I believe that the ideal of the United Nations is essential to the world. In my mind, it represents people's longing for unity and inclusion. Whether the U.N. is successful or not in any particular project, whether it has made mistakes or not, and whether its internal or external structures are optimal, does not diminish its essential value as a unique organization looking to address crucial world issues. The numerous struggles the U.N. faces reflect the magnitude of the goals it takes on.

'06 Archive

[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?](#)

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[What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.](#)

[The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review](#)

[Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency](#)

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

[Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine](#)

[Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

[Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter](#)

[Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer](#)

[M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder](#)

[Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)

[Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel](#)

[Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic](#)

[Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post](#)

[Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist](#)

[Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle](#)

[Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

Q: What projects are you planning in the future, writing or otherwise?

A. I am working on a second book, a sequel to "Tasting the Sky," and continuing to search for new ways and possibilities to spark constructive communication, kindness and healing regarding the situation in Israel and Palestine. The Palestinians need a home, freedom from the occupation and peace. The Israeli need a home, freedom from being occupiers, and peace. I like to contribute to all that can take us closer to the reality of freedom to all.

Q. What are your thoughts on the dwindling space given to book reviews?

A. It seems to me that the decreased focus on books in newspapers reflects a social reality that defines "newsworthy events" in an increasingly limited way. A new episode of violence -- be it domestic or international -- seems to often be newsworthy. But is the birth of a new book newsworthy? And engaging the new territory with all of its possibilities for rational discourse, possible empathy, expanding perspective, challenging the norms, change?

The book is a cornerstone of culture. And how it is treated also reflects the culture that it is produced in. I would like to suggest the possibility of a national conversation between newspaper owners, book publishers, book critics, authors and readers regarding finding new ways that benefit everyone -- for example rigorously promoting a culture that values more reading, arts, dialogue, questioning, and aware definitions of what constitutes newsworthy. --NBCC Intern Melody Ann Adams

Labels: [Author Interviews](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 12:34:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

 Anonymous said...

This is a really sad and changes the way you view Palestine. It is a good read!

5:41 PM

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5/14/2007

Howard Kurtz on CNN, Plus The Guardian & Chef Gordon Ramsay

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.

Howard Kurtz covered the NBCC-led protest at the Atlanta Journal Constitution and the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews in his [CNN](#) show, *Reliable Sources*, at the end of a broadcast that included references to Dick Cheney, Tony Blair, *Boxers or Briefs* and Alec Baldwin. Here's a snippet from the transcript:

HOWARD KURTZ: Newsroom budgets are strapped these days and publishing companies aren't doing as much print advertising. That is how it works. Food sections get supermarket ads. Auto sections get car ads. Travel sections get vacation ads. Since book reviews deal with exactly one product, it's hard for them to survive without plenty of publisher's ads...but books are important to our cultural life. In fiction, from John Updike to Philip Roth to J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter," certainly. But in journalism as well. Just look at the impact of such books as Bob Woodward's "State of Denial," Tom Ricks' "Fiasco," Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor's "Cobra II," and the debate over George Tenet's new book. And you would think newspapers, in an age of Web surfing, would want to encourage reading.

I wish this plot had a happy ending, I read books. I write books. I love books. There are more book blogs these days, and that is great. But book reviews are an important part of the conversation in this country. And regional papers can help highlight local authors.

The best-selling blockbuster types, Tom Clancy, John Grisham and the rest, will be fine, but thousands of other authors need book reviews to call attention to their work. I wish more newspapers would recognize

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that. It is, after all, something you can't get on TV.

NBCC president [John Freeman](#) writes in [The Guardian](#), "Clearly, the web holds enormous possibilities for cultural coverage, some of which is being driven forward by the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, and the Los Angeles Times, not to mention Poetryfoundation.org. The AJC will no doubt join them. But in the meantime, until broadband penetration reaches 100% in Atlanta and beyond, there are those other people who like a little ink on their fingers. Those people who buy the newspaper with a few quarters out of machines which haven't changed much since the 1950s. It is important for editors of papers such as the AJC to remember these readers. After all, without them, the paper wouldn't exist at all."

The NBCC's online [petition](#) to save the book editor's position at the AJC continues to gather signatures (5460 last we looked), including that of celebrity chef/author [Gordon Ramsay](#).

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:43:00 PM



4 COMMENTS:

 [PD Smith](#) said...

Long live the age of inky fingers!

As a reviewer & a blogger I'd like to say that both are important forms of comment & criticism. They clearly make different demands on writer and reader alike. But the world is a richer place for having both blogs and printed reviews - and I'm glad to know Gordon is sharpening his knives to go into battle on behalf of reviewers...

8:19 AM

 [Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

Thanks...agree the world is richer for both blogs and printed reviews. It's not the technology, which will continue to change, it's the passion for reading and writing about literature that matters, and why we need to support book culture in all its forms.

8:43 AM

 [book/daddy](#) said...

I sent a version of this comments to Romenekso yesterday, but they haven't seen fit to post it. So here goes:

In his CNN coverage of the National Book Critics Circle's campaign to save book review pages and book editors' jobs in newspapers, Howard Kurtz made this remarkable statement

Panels on the Book Review...
That Atheism, It's So Hot Right Now
Crime & Mystery Writers Supporting Reviews
A Critical Mass of Writers Mobilizes on Atlanta
The Sunday Morning Ritual
A Conversation with Sheila Kohler on Book Reviews
Rushdie vs. Colbert: The Book Section Beatdown
"Do we need 350,000 books a year...except for a bo..."

Past Posts Of Note

Reviewing 101: John Updike's Rules, which he admits breaking.
Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future
The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing
George Orwell on Book Reviews
Why Book Reviews Matter
The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30 Books in 30 Days
How We Choose Links for Roundup
What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?
Pub Date? What Pub Date? also Embargo Follies
On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books
The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey
Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey
To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June

about newspaper ad revenues: "Newsroom budgets are strapped these days and publishing companies aren't doing as much print advertising. That is how it works. Food sections get supermarket ads. Auto sections get car ads. Travel sections get vacation ads. Since book reviews deal with exactly one product, it's hard for them to survive without plenty of publisher's ads."

Let's apply this inventive analysis to the other sections of the paper: Ads from professional teams must support the sports section -- good luck finding a single display ad from the National Football League, by the way -- while criminals and the city school board must support the metro section. Federal agencies and lobbyists underwrite a newspaper's national coverage, angry letter writers buy ads to pay the op-ed columnists their salaries and, oh yes, umbrella salesmen and hail repair specialists must surely buy ads because otherwise no paper would run a weather map.

Instead of Mr. Kurtz' fanciful notion of newspaper finances, I would suggest this process as a more accurate version of events: Rather than being forced by a lack of book ads, when there never were many book ads, newspaper managers are choosing to gut select areas of the paper that do not directly fund themselves. They are choosing to gut international, national and cultural coverage because they've lost all faith that their reporters and critics could supply anything worthwhile or sufficiently different from whatever's available on wires or online.

Instead, they're bravely concentrating their efforts on local areas where they have, essentially, little or no competition.

10:00 AM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

Good analysis, Jerome W. Glad to see you here!

1:44 PM

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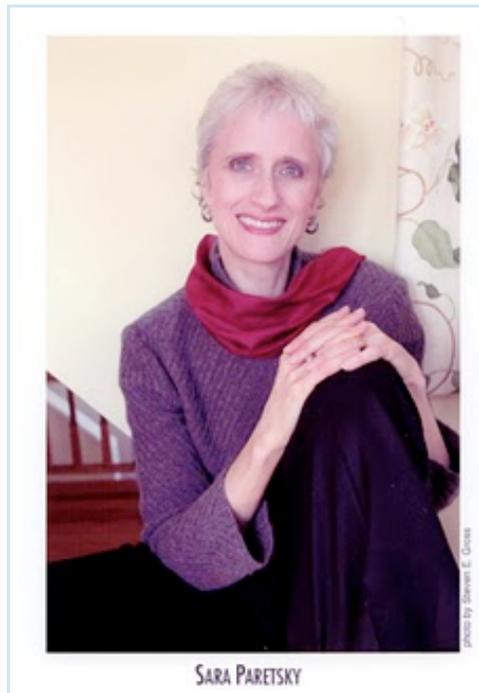
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5/15/2007

What We Talk about When We Talk about Stories



From [Sara Paretsky's](#) new collection of essays "[Writing in the Age of Silence](#)"

"I was a person raised to serve, who came of age in a passion for justice. My character dovetailed neatly with the times. My own sense of voicelessness also led me to see and feel the anguish of the powerless.

I had been writing since I was old enough to read, short stories that were, or at least tried to be, funny takes on the world around me, occasional mysteries, lots of fantasy. After my summer in Chicago, I started trying to write more naturalistic stories.

As a child, the worst thing about the Holocaust to had been the thought of so many people dying nameless, without anyone remembering them. As a young adult, I had the same fear about the people I'd been working with. No one would remember their stories. It became my mission to do that."

**

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 10:40:00 AM



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5/15/2007

Star Tribune Retains Book Editor

There is little joy in this, especially as the paper cuts one quarter (75 people out of 300) of its newsroom staff, but an organizational chart posted at the Star Tribune yesterday showed a book editor. But there will be no orchestra critic, no architecture critic/reporter, no TV critic or fashion reporter. It remains to be seen how much space books will retain in the paper. Who knows what economics are involved in this decision, but it would probably be good if people in the executive chairs at the Star Tribune read [James Surowiecki's recent "New Yorker" piece on the effects of downsizing](#).

"Over the past decade, many academics have looked at how layoffs affect stock prices, and they've found that the seven-per-cent rule is bunk. Instead of rising sharply, the stock of companies that trim their workforces is likely to fall. A recent meta-study that surveyed research from several countries, covering thousands of layoff announcements, concluded that, on average, markets had "a significantly negative" reaction to job cuts. Individual companies, of course, sometimes see stock prices jump after layoff news, but there's no evidence that downsizing is a guaranteed hit with investors.

This isn't to say that Wall Street has gone soft—it still cares about profits, not people. But investors seem to understand that fewer people doesn't always mean more profits. Downsizing may make companies temporarily more productive, but the gains quickly erode, in part because of the predictably negative effect on morale. And numerous studies suggest that, despite the lower payroll costs, layoffs do not make firms more profitable; Wayne Cascio, a management professor at the University of Colorado at Denver, looked at more than three hundred firms that downsized in the nineteen-eighties and found that three years after the layoffs the companies' returns on assets, costs, and profit margins had not improved. It's possible that these companies would have done even worse had they not downsized, but for the average company the effect of layoffs on the bottom line appears to be negligible."

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5/16/2007

What We Talk About When We Talk About Change (Part 1)



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which

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features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. Before we started this campaign last month, we asked NBCC member Mark Sarvas, of [The Elegant Variation](#), for his thoughts on these issues and the future of reviews and here is what he had to say.

I have been mulling over this post for weeks now, watching developments with interest and, perhaps, a trace of unease. It's an unease borne of a growing sense that the wrong story is being told.

I was, I admit, disappointed by the recent [New York Times](#) article, which hewed to the reviewers vs. blogs storyline. (Josh Getlin's [Los Angeles Times](#) article went a considerable distance toward recasting that storyline.)

I am divided, pulled in three directions – as a blogger, as a book reviewer, and as a novelist with a debut on the way. The blogger in me wants to say, above all, that (Richard Ford, Michael Dirda and a few intemperate bloggers notwithstanding) bloggers and print journalists

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

[Art Winslow](#)

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are not – and should not be placed – in opposition. The story, as I keep suggesting, is much bigger than that.

As a soon-to-be-published novelist, I can't help but watch with alarm as book review pages are hacked away.

But here's the thing that concerns me most as I watch this saga unfold – and it's as a fledgling book reviewer, peering into the future. Even if this campaign is successful in [restoring Teresa Weaver's position – a truly noble and laudable cause](#) - it's only a matter of time until this battle surfaces again. And again. I applaud the impulse that animates the support for Weaver but whatever the outcome, it doesn't seem to engage the big picture. The battle might be won but the war will be lost. I think the NBCC should consider expanding the circle of its creative energies beyond the short-term problem in Atlanta and face the larger questions here, the most significant of which, I believe, is:

How do people get their information today?

I realize some of what follows is unlikely to endear me to some members of the NBCC but I think an unwillingness to take up some seemingly intractable questions bodes poorly for the future. I'd like to touch on a few things I've observed during this debate:

Beware the alarmists: Whether it's coming from [Ford](#) or [Howard Zinn](#) (although it's disappointing coming from a historian), bleating about the end of civilization as we know it is tedious. Nearly every age has its Cassandras declaring the death of reading. Books have been killed by radio, cinema, television and, most recently, the internet. (In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill decries the fact that the people no longer take their opinions from books ... but from newspapers!) I side with those who take heart in the number of titles published each year, in the crowds in book stores and at events like the [Los Angeles Times Festival of Books](#) and [PEN World Voices](#), and who think it will take more than the disappearance of book pages from newspapers to kill books. They are made of sterner stuff.

Beware the echo chamber: It's gratifying, indeed, to see so many writers come out in support of all this – or is it? I am struck that the proliferation of editors, reviewers and authors signing the petition all have a vested, financial interest in continuing book review pages. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but too few have acknowledged how much easier that makes it for those in power to dismiss this enterprise as nothing more than enlightened self-interest. I wonder – how many Atlanta residents or AJC readers are on the petition? Some probably, but too few. Which leads me to:

The Reader has the power: The readers have to respond, make

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A Conversation with Ibtisam Barakat

A Quick Roundup

NBCC Announces Three BEA Panels on the Book Review...

That Atheism, It's So Hot Right Now

Crime & Mystery Writers Supporting Reviews

A Critical Mass of Writers Mobilizes on Atlanta

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Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future

The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30 Books in 30 Days

How We Choose Links for Roundup

What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?

Pub Date? What Pub Date? also Embargo Follies

On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books

The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey

Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey

To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive

their voices heard and – above all – their purchasing power felt. I'm a great admirer of [David Kipen](#) and he's been on both sides of the editorial divide so he knows way more than I do but I couldn't help but wonder if his assessment of this scenario was colored by some wishful thinking:

Will this campaign work? The facile answer is, say you're a newspaper publisher. You've got some bolting stockholders on line 1 and some angry brilliant midlist writers on line 2. Which call would you take? But the intelligent answer is, as always, nobody knows.

I'm either facile, a cynic, or a realist but when I put on my publisher hat, I look at it this way: I have some editors, writers, reviewers trying to save their livelihood – none of whom actually reads or buys my newspaper – sending me petitions telling me what to do. Why should I listen?

What if, instead of bolting stockholders, line 1 (or petition B) has subscribers canceling their subscriptions and advertisers pulling their ads? To a large extent, readers get the book reviews they deserve – or settle for – and they are the ones who have to make their voices heard above our own. (And the fact that readers probably don't have the commercial muscle to influence advertisers should be another big piece of this discussion. One certainly never sees Sports sections being cut, and if Don Imus were a book reviewer, he might still have a job.) Which leads me to:

To continue reading, follow this link to [The Elegant Variation](#) to hear Mark's thoughts on change and the way of the future.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 10:35:00 AM



6 COMMENTS:

Chuck Leddy said...

Thanks, Mark, for these insightful and thought-provoking remarks on the present status of book reviews. I'm in complete agreement that the landscape is changing/transitioning, but it may take years for "new realities" to emerge. I hope there will be healthy, vibrant discussions about books in both print and online media, but I suspect book lovers will have to raise their voices and begin demanding that. As you said, we get the book coverage we deserve & will fight for. Keep speaking up and speaking out!

6:20 PM

grackyfrogg said...

really liked this post. well done, Mark.

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

Writers Read Your Contracts Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

Criticism For Sale??

No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks

What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.

The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review

Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine

Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly

Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter

Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer

M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder

Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel

Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic

Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Subil Steinberg, Contributing

7:54 PM

 grackyfrogg said...

by the way, i am not sure the link to the LA Times article is the correct one...?

8:17 PM

 PT Caffey said...

Mark Sarvas leads us down a longwinded road to the obvious: "the landscape is changing." This is evidence of one problematic tendency with bloggers; they suffer from a neverending supply of space and ink. This lack of constraint invites sloppiness and overflow (literally--follow the link!).

Sarvas takes a swipe at Michael Dirda. Although Dirda favors print, he also conducts a weekly online interactive discussion with readers who care to participate and has done so for years. Thus, with Dirda, you get both erudition, in his reviews, and interactivity, in these chats.

With "The Elegant Variation," you get advance word of book signings and literary gossip. I enjoy these things, but they can never replace a true literary reviewer.

8:23 PM

 kgs said...

You make the point about readers. Yet this campaign is featuring "posts by concerned writers" (and reviewers, etc. -- the echo chamber you reference).

Well, of *course* writers are concerned about reviews. But what about readers? Or the readers' surrogates, librarians?

Much as I love reviews and appreciate reviewing as its own art, to be successful, this "campaign" needs to reach beyond reviewers and talk to readers. A petition won't cut it. Stop telling me what reviewers and writers think about reviewing and share a little about what readers have to say.

8:36 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

Mark, appreciate the two-part, two-blog post. (If you click on the link to the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews, you will see that it is not simply focused on Atlanta.) As far as Atlanta goes, the petition, which was nearing 6,000 names last I looked, includes comments from hundreds of readers as well as authors and critics. This discussion will continue tomorrow with comments from Lee Smith about the farewell column of Peder Zane, former NBCC board member and until this week her hometown (Raleigh) book editor. I am convinced this discussion is not simply about technology, which is continually changing

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*

Richard Powers

*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

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*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
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*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

12 Questions for Chimamanda

(and print reviewers are now also blogging and vice versa), but about the need to preserve book culture. The more voices and forms sustaining the passion for literature, the better.

12:39 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

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[Smatterings, the Lazy Woman's Edition](#)

[When it is not necessary to change ...](#)

[WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT CHANGE
\(PART 2\)](#)

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5/16/2007

Book Reviews in Literary Journals

Posted by Eric Miles Williamson

While the NBCC has been campaigning to keep book review sections in newspapers from shrinking, disappearing, and being monopolized by syndicates, very little attention has been paid to book reviews in America's hundreds upon hundreds of literary journals and magazines. And while our efforts are noble at saving the book review sections of newspapers, it seems to this Board member that the battle we're fighting will ultimately be lost. Newspapers exist to make money. They are commercial enterprises. The Hearst Corporation (from which I receive checks) is not, ultimately, concerned with advancing culture or belle lettres. It wants, like any other creature, not only to survive, but, as Faulkner says of man, to *prevail*. If book review sections do not pay as well as sections devoted to celebrity gossip, and do not, therefore, sell ad space that brings in as much cash as an expanded celebrity gossip section, then book review space will be cut. If the NBCC gathers 10,000, even 20,000 signatures in support of book reviews in newspapers, and those signatures from all around the globe, what does this matter to a newspaper executive in Seattle or Milwaukee or Detroit if only 20 of those signatures, or even 200 of them, are from his base of operations? If a newspaper has a circulation of 500,000 and 200 of those people want to save the book review section, while at the same time 100,000 people would enjoy reading about Brad Pitt's most recent workout at the gym, Brad Pitt's a-gonna win out.

This said, I believe the book review is in better health than it has ever been in this country. I have in front of me a recent issue of Kevin Prufer's *Pleiades: A Journal of New Writing*, the literary journal published out of the University of Central Missouri. It comes out twice a year, and the issue on my desk has 27 reviews totalling over 100 pages, some as long as 4500 words. None of these reviewers get paid a nickel. Also on my desk is *American Book Review*, for which I edit. We publish six times a year, and our most recent issue has 30 reviews, each of which is at least 1000 words. We pay fifty bucks, but we beg our

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reviewers to accept a subscription or a gift subscription, and most of them forgo the cash. Then there's *The Georgia Review*, *Poetry*, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, *Chelsea*, *The Southern Review*, *The Arkansas Review*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and hundreds of other literary journals published both independently and by universities. Thousand upon thousands of reviews published every year, many more, I'd venture, than published by the newspapers.

Literary journals rarely pay, and if they do, it's a pittance. And this, perhaps, is to the good. The people writing for the literary journals are not doing so to make a living. How many reviews in a month does someone have to write to make a living? If good pay, like the *LA Times*, is \$400, then one would have to publish at least 10 reviews a month to even live like a squatter in Los Angeles. The people who write for literary journals, on the other hand, are not writing for the money: they're writing for the love of literature.

And it's literature they review. If you want to read a review of a book of poetry or short story collection or a book of criticism published by a university press (which is where most books of criticism are published), you'd better read the literary journals. It's unlikely you'll ever read a review of a short story collection by an unknown in a major newspaper unless the author or the house is *very* connected. Who reviewed Kevin McIlvoy's *The History of New Mexico*? Not the papers. The literary journals. And it's one of the best collections in recent memory, standing alongside Chris Offutt's *Kentucky Straight* and Mark Nesbitt's *Gigantic* and Larry Fondation's *Angry Nights*.

The book review won't die. But reviewers and editors will eventually have to face up to the fact of a non-literary general public. If they're concerned with having their say about contemporary letters, they might try querying a literary journal for an assignment. They'll have more latitude, be able to write potentially at length, and their reviews won't appear alongside advertisements for the latest Harry Potter installment. Their reviews will appear instead alongside the reviews of other people who take literature with the seriousness of the people who write it. Ain't no ads for furs, cars, bestsellers, bras, stripclubs, car batteries, or time-share real estate in lit-mags: just ads for other lit-mags that most likely publish book reviews.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY ERIC MILES WILLIAMSON 7:49:00 PM



9 COMMENTS:

PD Smith said...

I'm all in favour of literary journals; but they are only read by

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Talk about Stories*

*Howard Kurtz on CNN, Plus The
Guardian & Chef Gord...*

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Now*

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Rules, which he admits
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*Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
routine, and feeling glum about
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*The NBCC's Tips For Successful
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George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

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*How We Choose Links for
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*What's Graphic and What's a
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them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive*

literary people. Surely the importance of having fiction and non-fiction reviewed in daily newspapers is that books remain an essential part of everyday culture, rather than becoming the preserve of a select few.

Also, as an independent researcher who also reviews (and sometimes gets paid!), I'm uncomfortable with your implication that if you are paid to write a piece you are not writing "for the love of literature".

In my experience, literary journals in the UK that don't pay very much often become the preserve of salaried academics. I think it's also good to sometimes hear the voices of people who earn their daily crust from writing...but then I guess I'm biased!

3:28 AM

B Clark said...

I'll second that. I write for both love and money.

9:08 AM

B J.D. Smith said...

As someone who has always written for love and is starting to write for money, I understand that the impulses can coexist.

Still, money can get in the way. The *New York Times Book Review*, which will run a two-page ad for Danielle Steel's latest book, is unlikely to run an honest review of that book.

Our newspapers (and leading magazines) generally reflect whatever the significant and/or established forces are in the culture or in a particular field. (Robert Crumb didn't get into *The New Yorker* by making that his first and foremost career goal.)

With this in mind, we can see the journals as a subversive force or a form of cultural resistance, laying siege to various mainstream citadels.

Although I would love to be published in either of the titles I have cited, I also know it would be foolish to sit on the doorstep and beg for inclusion, or beg to be let back in after getting booted out.

1:13 AM

B Steve D said...

Mr. Williamson's comments seem level-headed to me and market-savvy. Sure, book reviews should manifest in as many places as possible, cultivating as many different relationships between books and readers as possible. But to say that newspapers are capitalist enterprises likely to act like capitalist enterprises and to remind us that book reviews will continue even if we lose some battles strike me as sensible things to say.

Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?

*Writers Read Your Contracts
Earth to Academia*

*Medical Apartheid: Research
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics
Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad
Review*

*Don't Know Much About
Counterinsurgency*

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
Editor, Minneapolis Star
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle*

1:27 AM

 lizzie skurnick said...

Hear hear!

@j.d. (same person?) I don't think ANY reviewer working for print outside of magazines today can be said to be writing for money.

@p.d. I think it's untrue that journals are only read by "literary" people--or at least, no more so than many of the people that turn to the book reviews. Most of the people who mention works of mine that appear in journals are--?--lawyers.

@j.d. again: I can't speak for most other papers, but the NYT has an enormous wall between reviewers and advertisers. What evidence do you have for what you're saying?

12:35 PM

 J.D. Smith said...

@Lizzie Skurnick:

Thanks for taking the time to read my comment. I definitely would agree with you that almost no one is reviewing primarily for money. Certainly a major litblogger like yourself knows that better than the vast majority of folks. (Where do you find the hours in the day?)

My comment on the *Times Book Review* was pretty much shooting from the hip, and I would be delighted to be proven wrong on that. Although I doubt if anyone is buying a positive review from the *Times*, I suspect certain books for which much ad space is bought are not reviewed at all so as to avoid unpleasantness. Again, I would be delighted to be proven wrong on this point, as I could use a little good news in this crazy, mixed-up world.

2:34 PM

 Rebecca Skloot said...

Nicely done Eric. Everyone should subscribe to literary journals ... check out [this great set up](#) from Dan Wickett at the Emerging Writers Network -- he's spreading the literary journal love via discounted subscriptions (excellent work, Dan!)

9:24 PM

 PD Smith said...

Hi Lizzie, good to hear from you (and the others)!

No not the same as jd...there may be more than one smith around...

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
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*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

12 Questions for Chimamanda

I'm not knocking literary reviews -but I would still rather see books reviewed as widely as possible: on blogs, in newspapers, on TV, on radio - everywhere! The more people reading books the better as far as I'm concerned.

9:15 AM



K.G. Schneider said...

Do not forget that we absolutely must gather our forces and protest the postal increases that unfairly burden the small presses.

8:56 PM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

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5/17/2007

Richard Powers on the Shared Solitude of Reading



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of the campaign's [blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about [how you can get involved](#) to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. We

recently asked four-time NBCC finalist Richard Powers if he could share with us his thoughts on what function reviews serve in our society today, and how they can do it better. Here is his response.

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Maureen McLane

PEOPLE PROBABLY HAVE as many reasons for reading literary reviews as they have for reading literary novels. For me, narrative is values in collision – commitment and confusion and crisis unfolding over time. In a great story, we are challenged to see the world through someone else's eyes. Any attempt to interpret the world puts a character's – and consequently a reader's – values on the line and leaves them up for grabs. The best kind of readers, like the best kind of literary characters, are not the same people coming out of the story as they were going in.

So my favorite kind of reviewing doesn't stand apart and judge that narrative process; it takes part in it and extends the web of relations

[Scott McLemee](#)

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between values and facts that the book itself explores. The breathtaking and beautiful review reveals its own meta-narrative: here's who I, the reviewer, am in the presence of this book, and here's what happened to me as these characters made and unmade themselves. The reviewer becomes yet another character in the contested collisions that narrative unfolds. I know a good review – whether I've read the book under review or not – when I finish the review thinking about the world differently than when I began it. A good novel makes me a more robust character in my own life. A good review makes me a better reader of my own and others' narratives.

The problem is, changing technology invariably produces its own head-on collision of values. The cost of conveying information has plummeted, and we are converging on that moment when everyone will be able to know what anyone else thinks about anything at any given moment. Ideally, I think this is great: it's the logical extension of the promise implicit in that ancient and most destabilizing of technologies, writing. The complication, of course, is that noise and signal both become cheaper at the same rate, and the novels and reviews that are most capable of making me a better reader may well become harder to find, even as they become more numerous and more thoughtful and more robust. We are in danger of drowning in an ocean of liking or disliking.

I honestly don't think our crisis is print reviews versus blogs, specialization versus populism, or even the exclusivity of the elite versus the tyranny of the majority. I think our crisis is instant evaluation versus expansive engagement, real time versus reflective time, commodity versus community, product versus process. Substituting a user's rating for a reader's rearrangement threatens to turn literature into a lawn ornament. What we need from reviewers in any medium are guides to how to live actively inside a story.

Reading is solitary; reviewing is the shared solitude of reading. As throughput accelerates and the cost of information falls, engaged seclusion and slow reflection become more valuable. Changes in technology change the terms of this contest, but not the stakes. Like any good crisis, this one can only be resolved through narrative – the turbulent act of figuring out how to read what's writing us.

Here's Roberto Calasso, in [Literature and the Gods](#):

In the delirium of their love affair with the microchip, people insist on asking tedious questions about the survival of the printed word, while the truly extraordinary phenomenon that is everywhere before us is never even mentioned: the vertiginous and unprecedented concentration of power that has gathered and is gathering in the pure act of reading.

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[Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey](#)

[To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)

[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain](#)

--Richard Powers

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:53:00 AM



2 COMMENTS:

 [PD Smith](#) said...

Great piece! What more is there to say...

9:26 AM

 [Nicholas Manning](#) said...

Wonderful. Powers as eloquent as ever. Thanks for the campaign, and for this: I'll link to it.

Nicholas Manning
www.thecontinentalreview.com

5:52 PM

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[Literature's Solitude](#)

[Review this](#)

[Richard Powers on reviews and the solitude of reading.](#)

[Publishing Spotted: Nicaraguan Nightmare, Reviewers Reviewed, and ...](#)

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5/17/2007

Frankly, My Dear, You Should Give a Damn



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. Shannon Byrne, an Atlanta-based publicist for Little, Brown, offered this response to Mark Sarvas's

two-part post earlier this week on Critical Mass and on his own literary blog, The Elegant Variation.

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Maureen McLane

Sorry, Mark. Time to wake up from your misguided dream that “newspapers are dying” and should be learning from bloggers about how to evolve. See, I’m afraid that the food chain does not move in that direction when it’s called progress. Last time I checked, which was 5 to 7 daily e-newsletters ago, bloggers stay pretty busy sorting through, and hyperlinking to the major newspapers and other media each morning (often throughout the day), so that they can send all the rest of us, who are ostensibly too busy to sort through the chaotic, information-overloaded world ourselves, the Cliff’s Note’s version of all of the major headlines and gossip of the day. Seems to me, then, that the majority of bloggers (not all of them) actually function to critique, organize, and sort actual media rather than to generate much original literary criticism or innovative content themselves. You illustrate my point right off by positioning your post in response to the Los Angeles Times and

[Scott McLemee](#)

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New York Times.

The best blogs are wonderful tools and welcome simplifying resources. The worst of them are mini-altars of self-worship, which are obsessed mostly with how many “hits” and how much “traffic” they get than with the quality of their offering. How can you claim that a newspaper’s “wider readership” is a fallacy when one could just as easily allege that the number of pings and pongs and “hits” a blog gets can be fixed by strategically linking to the most googled topics and names of the moment and to the sites of all of your blogger buddies? Why bust on Publishers Lunch for tracking and archiving book reviews, when clearly the reviews here are used by a variety of people within the publishing industry.

Seriously, though, blogs are kind of like parasitic microorganisms which feed off of a primary host. For the sake of this discussion, the host is clearly print media. Some are the good bacteria and some are transient and viral. Or maybe I can upgrade blogs to the status of some sort of interstitial or synovial fluid, buffering the vital organs of the media (newspaper, television, radio, the Internet)? But, c’mon, if newspapers are dying, then blogs are the maggots come to feast upon their corpses.

Those in the business of publishing quality newspapers should take a look at all of the clutter and sheer chatter ping-ponging around cyberspace and continue to print good, even better, newspapers. These newspapers will stand out in a less commoditized way precisely if they do not make the mistake of simply remodeling themselves into primarily digital formats. Maybe now that attention’s being called to the perceived dispensability of book review pages, then a major paper like the Atlanta Journal-Constitution will see fit to do something radical like be the third among only two others in the country to publish a stand-alone book review section.

And who said anything about “the death of reading?” Or that the disappearance of newspaper book sections would “kill books?” Why does this campaign need to be called a “saga?” How did you make the leap from the NBCC’s goal to raise public awareness to somehow being able to see the future, a future involving a newspaper industry collapse and more glory for bloggers like you? Talk about false prophets (dead giveaway is to deny that one can see future). I just cannot get over how condescending it all sounds when bloggers act like what’s happening with newspapers is something they’ve known about all along. Whatever. You say you know that deep inside there should be no opposition between the online and print sides of book reviewing, but clearly you have some sort of triumphant smirk about all of this.

I think it’s fair to say that the point has always been that book culture is

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Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
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Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey
To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive
Why Do Critics Ignore Certain*

at risk with the continued reduction in space devoted to print books coverage. To be clear, the NBCC has asked the important question of whether we're just going to watch this happen, and if we have given any thought lately to just how meaningful print books reviews have always been and continue to be, or if we're going to be proactive. I think it reflects a particular genius that the NBCC board and their blog, Critical Mass, have brought together, in one place for all to see, the staggering details of the spate of downsized book review sections across the country.

How can you suggest that the NBCC is just pitting around with "the short-term problem in Atlanta?" What is happening in Atlanta can have a critical bearing on what happens at other newspapers. The Atlanta Read-In and the print and online petitions which have circulated here have demonstrated action, garnered national attention and further galvanized the literary community here—and the activism has only just begun. Atlanta is the latest major city to axe its book review editor and was therefore the clear choice as the NBCC's focus of their national campaign. It is completely ridiculous for you to speculate about how many Atlantans or actual AJC subscribers signed the petition. What, am I supposed to feel guilty for not paying fifty cents a day for the paper and therefore ineligible to sign the petition? Back to your argument that a newspaper's circulation is a fallacy: many non-subscribers read the papers lying around at coffee shops. Some grab from recycling bins. Some buy here and there. Anyway, I can tell you that a majority of the signatures are from Atlantans—except for one Dinty W. Moore, a beef stew brand, and Zora Neal(e) Hurston, who died in 1960 in Fort Pierce, FL to be sure.

Look: I am proud of Atlanta's literary community for not sitting on its ass when the news hit that Teresa Weaver would be out of a job and that the paper would not have a book review editor forward moving. The petition and Read-In have stirred up a lot of dialogue and have genuinely gotten people excited. I'm sick and tired of people thinking that the only American thing to do is to hit someone in their pocketbook when you're not pleased. To them that's the only form of political action they know. To buy or not to buy. Spending power. To sanction or to endorse, and to act entitled in the almighty role, not of citizen, but as customer, consumer.

There are other ways to be heard than to kick the AJC while it's down by demanding that people cancel their subscriptions. We can do more than simply dump our proverbial tea into Boston Harbor. I knew we had somehow gotten through when the editor of the AJC said that she recognized a number of her own friends' names on the petition. We've promised to present the AJC with ideas of what they might consider doing, so as to protect the integrity of the books coverage to come. Maybe after the new features editor goes to BEA the paper will realize that they need a book review editor after all. I sure hope so.

[Books?](#)

[Writers Read Your Contracts](#)

[Earth to Academia](#)

[Medical Apartheid: Research](#)

[Ethics and Reviewing Ethics](#)

[Criticism For Sale??](#)

[No Buzz Marketing or Amazon](#)

[Paybacks](#)

[What to do with review copies?](#)

[This or maybe this.](#)

[The Best Way to Respond to a Bad](#)

[Review](#)

[Don't Know Much About](#)

[Counterinsurgency](#)

[The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors](#)

[Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine](#)

[Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

[Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter](#)

[Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer](#)

[M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder](#)

[Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)

[Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel](#)

[Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic](#)

[Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post](#)

[Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist](#)

[Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle](#)

[Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

[Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:32:00 PM



17 COMMENTS:



Max said...

"Seriously, though, blogs are kind of like parasitic microorganisms which feed off of a primary host. For the sake of this discussion, the host is clearly print media."

I'm assuming this is an attempt to say that blogs don't create original (worthwhile) content.

Here are three (of many) recent examples of original content by contributors to my blog. To say that these reviews wouldn't be worthy of most any print book section is to be willfully disingenuous:

A [review](#) of Murakami's *After Dark*.

A [review](#) of Pynchon's *Against the Day*.

A [review](#) of Richard Ford's *Lay of the Land*

And there are plenty of examples of reviews of this caliber at quite a few other blogs.

3:46 PM



Dan Wickett said...

Dinty W. Moore may not live in Atlanta, probably not seeing as he teaches at Ohio University. But, having edited Brevity for years and having numerous stories and essays published the past decade, I'm assuming while it probably happens every so often, he'd prefer not being referenced solely as a "beef stew brand."

4:11 PM



Jack Pendarvis said...

Well, now, to be fair, I first learned of the AJC situation on the blog in question (The Elegant Variation), and the blog seemed pretty upset about the whole thing, as a matter of fact. So I think we're all on the same side! Let's be friends!

4:55 PM



grackyfrogg said...

i thought the main point mark was making was to say that, ultimately, we need to learn how to adjust to the ever-changing landscape of how people get and digest information, in such ways that both writers and readers can benefit. i didn't at all get

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

Talking With Chimanda Adichie

*Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*

Richard Powers

*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

Q & A with Kiran Desai

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie*

5 Questions for Amu Helnel

the impression that he was saying "get rid of newspapers and print reviews" or anything along those lines.

the tone of this post seems unnecessarily antagonistic and reactionary, given the support for book reviews—as well as for teresa weaver—that i've seen on mark's blog.

5:35 PM

 jweaver said...

To be fair- traffic is also a huge player in papers, commercials and radio. Fees and ad rates are set by trafficking. Newspapers ARE DYING, but it is because of their own dumb choices and mistakes. Circulation is down- way down. The AJC is bleeding cash and readers yearly- the issue is how to stem the tide. They believe that they need to limit expenses and make cuts in features, writers and coverage. Guess what- that is why they will die. People want more features and talented writers. It seems so easy but as these papers are controlled by Large Meglo companies it will not end. They see it as a dollar sign and not for all that the papers can be.

It is odd that Wall street Journal was the only Major paper to see an increase in not only revenue but subscriptions. They also are leading the wave of the migration to an online world. I do not see the papers lasting a long time unless they strive to IMPROVE and gutting book and arts sections are not the answer.

5:43 PM

 Jeff said...

"But, c'mon, if newspapers are dying, then blogs are the maggots come to feast upon their corpses."

Ah, so now we're maggots. Gloating maggots. Lovely.

Let's try this, how 'bout it, Shannon. Try to get your protest out there and try to generate interest in your campaign and make all of your complaints about blogs and their gloating ways without doing so ON A BLOG! Let's get ya to a Kinkos so you can run off a couple a thousand letters and then to the post office where you can take advantage of the perma-41 cent stamp to send it off to the world. Or maybe try and run your essay and an accompanying petition in one of the newspapers that still has

5 Questions for Amy Hempel

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*

*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's
Working On*

*Tom Bissell: What He's Working
On and What He's Reading*

*Jonathan Lethem: What He's
Working On*

*Ian McEwan on his Writing
Process*

Don DeLillo on Actors and Death

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching
Poetry*

Dave Eggers on Generosity

Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory

John Updike on Michiko Kakutani

*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike
and "Blood Meridian"*

Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"

*Andrew Sean Greer on "The
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier
and Clay"*

Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books

John Irving on John Irving

Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"

*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things
They Carried"*

Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina

Brad Benischeck

Jason Berry Part I

Jason Berry Part II

Susan Larson

Jason Berry (Part I)

Jason Berry (Part II)

Brad Benischeck

*Thinking About New Orleans: An
Update (6/04/07)*

James Lee Burke

Ken Foster

Louisiana in Words

Joshua Clark

book coverage. Or maybe sit outside a Krogers on a Sunday next to the guy giving out a free copy of the paper and a t-shirt if you'll subscribe. Hmm, doesn't work so well, does it?

6:17 PM



Dan Wickett said...

More reasons not to dash off posts while you're still very upset (that is, besides calling a respected author and editor a can of stew):

The misguided "dream" that newspapers are dying. This link is to a study by journalism.org using what appears to be reputable data. Over the course of the 1990's circulation in this country dropped 11%. The average newspaper bought per household was nearly 1 1/4 papers at one point and has dropped to barely over 1/2 a paper. If newspapers are not dying, they must at least be considered to be sick:

http://www.stateofthenewsmedia.org/narrative_newspapers_audience.asp

There was no "bust on Publishers Lunch" - Mark referred to PL as a means of example - how one could find that the same books were being reviewed over and over.

Saga - frequently seen definition via dictionary.com is a "long, detailed story." Seems a pretty accurate definition of what the Critical Mass coverage of this issue has been.

Pretty sure you meant piddling and not pitting.

Why is it "completely ridiculous" for Mark to question the percentages of those who signed the petition that are AJC readers, but not at all ridiculous for you to state that the MAJORITY are from the Atlanta area? There are over 6000 names on that thing, right? So, you can count over 3,000 that you KNOW are from Atlanta?

Who said anything about the death of reading? Well, Sheila Kohler for one, on this blog, in this campaign stated: "Reviews are extremely important to me as a writer. They are what lets the public know about our books. Without them I don't really see how books could survive."

And the constant references to Sarvas as a blogger (man, it even tastes bad in my own mouth to use the word after reading it so bitterly in your post) - the man wrote a review printed by the New York Times Book Review a week ago - pretty close to the pinnacle for NBCC members from what I understand. He also has a novel due out next spring - more than enough reason to not hope for the death of print reviews. He has also supported this campaign from day one, and consistently stated there should be no dividing line between bloggers and print reviewers as both are passionate about literature.

Josna Clark

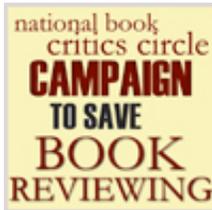
Julie Smith

Andrei Codrescu

Blake Bailey

Tom Piazza

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go=saveBookReviews"  
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ARCHIVES

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May 2008

There are a couple of excellent points in this post - pretty much the whole paragraph starting with "Those in the business of publishing quality newspapers..." for instance. But, it's tough to find them when going through all of the above and stopping to question what I was reading over and over.

So it's not some big gotcha moment - I am a blogger. However, as of this October, I'll also be an independent publisher, looking for those reviews -- both in print, and online.

7:26 PM

 Jordan said...

It's possible that book review culture is finally experiencing what poetry culture has had to deal with since before the death of T.S. Eliot: charges of arrogance, irrelevance, and meaninglessness.

Straw poll: how many book critics think poets brought that criticism on themselves.

Second question: how many book critics are now willing to rethink the political circumstances around the marginalization of poetry.

11:20 AM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

I've been a fan of Dinty W. Moore (the author/editor, not the stew) since I heard him at the AWP a few years back, and I have been eager to read his memoir, which I understand is coming out in early 2008 from U. of Nebraska Press. He starts teaching at Ohio University in the fall.

4:37 PM

 Rebecca Skloot said...

Sigh.

I was surprised by this post for several reasons. I won't list them all here, but I will say this: Its venomous aggression toward bloggers was uncalled for and reads more like a knee-jerk response to Mark's post than the kind of carefully thought-out commentary we invite here. It would have been more appropriate as a personal response from the writer in the comment section of Mark's post. Like several others, I was surprised to see Dinty's name invoked as being fake ... If he weren't somewhere between Pennsylvania and Ohio, where he's moving this moment, I'm sure he would get a tremendous kick out of this entire thread and post some brilliant comment about it.

In response to the frustrated comments above, and the many emails I've gotten complaining about this post, I will literally cut and paste a comment I posted last week, because it applies here

June 2008

July 2008

August 2008

September 2008

October 2008

November 2008

December 2008



perhaps even more than it applied there:

Just to remind everyone: All opinions posted here are the poster's. They're not those of the NBCC or the Critical Mass bloggers as a whole ... Personally, I agree with the complaints I've been hearing about the anti-blog sentiment in this post. As anyone who's a regular Critical Mass reader knows, I'm a huge fan of lit blogs (which is why I started this one in the first place), and I think the whole print vs. litblog thing is pointless.

The way I see it, complaining about lit blogs is akin to complaining about the advent of the telephone, the internet, the BlackBerry ... technology advances and brings with it many wonderful opportunities. And plenty of headaches. What you get from it depends on what you put into it, how open you are to change, and how willing you are to work around the headaches (it's true, there are many mediocre and bad blogs out there, but that doesn't mean they're all bad. Far from it, actually). Litblogs offer an endless new platform for talking about books, sharing books, keeping books alive ... That's a good thing.

4:42 PM

 Mark Sarvas said...

Rebecca (and others), thanks for the thoughtful commentary, and the attempt to bring this all back down to earth. This post, finally, says much more about the author than about book reviewing or blogs.

I would, however, pursue your point about posts on this blog. Although they might not reflect the NBCC stance and are opinions of individual posters, (a) they are solicited by NBCC, which does put the organization in some position of considering their impact and (b) the perception - and perception, we know, for better or worse, is reality - will be there that the stance is sanctioned or tacitly endorsed in some way by NBCC. That's one of the things to consider with a group blog. Like it or not, intended or not, Ms. Byrne's post will be taken by many, correctly or not, as the voice of the NBCC.

That said, everyone is obviously entitled to their opinion, even intemperate ones.

4:54 PM

 Rebecca Skloot said...

Yes, Mark, you're absolutely right. Running a group blog is tricky.

The NBCC actually doesn't invite anyone to post here. Several posts are sent unsolicited. Many are invited by one *individual blogger* or another, but the rest of the blogging committee generally doesn't know who's posting what until we read it on the blog like everyone else. Regardless of who posts, what they

say, or who invited them, there truly is no connection between any statements on this blog and the NBCC as an organization (or even all the bloggers who post here).

I understand it's easy to make the assumption that posts here somehow represent the NBCC or all Critical Mass bloggers, but that's simply not the case (which is why I'm constantly posting comments reminding people otherwise).

5:14 PM

 [Mark Sarvas](#) said...

Thanks for clarifying, Rebecca. You're right - I was invited by John Freeman. Since he's president, I took it as an institutional request but I can see why I oughtn't have. Perhaps labelling each post with a disclaimer might help.

Oh, and "ot noy" is a rather amusing typo for "or not".

5:24 PM

 [Dan Wickett](#) said...

Personally, I feel a bit sorry for Rebecca. Nobody else seems to be willing to jump back into comments sections when they get so excitable, and I know from emailing back and forth with her - the views being expressed in the posts that get we litbloggers so excitable, are not even close to her own.

To me, she's become the sacrificial lamb pushed out on stage to take the tomatoes thrown at the NBCC.

At least she's adding something to the comments. She's right that obviously when you have a multi-user blog, not everybody's views are going to be the same.

But it does begin to sound very trite hearing over and over again that the views expressed are not those of the bloggers. Then two days later reading that by virtue of being a blogger I'm parasitic (though you can count on your fingers the number of times I have linked to major media in the past two years) and/or a maggot. It makes it hard to believe that the general feelings of those involved with this blog don't at least lean heavily towards being anti-blogger.

Go back and read the comments that drew the ire of bloggers from Sheila Kohler. Look at the question before her reply - I'd really have difficulty believing that her response isn't what the questioner was looking for.

While this post by Shannon Byrne was seemingly NOT solicited, I'm stunned it was not just bounced back to her with some comments about the ridiculous inaccuracies within it. Why let her become a source of ridicule? Why not ask her if she'd like to re-think her comments after cooling down a bit?

I know - this blog is nobody's job. It's done in what little spare time the individuals have. But by being sloppy in your spare time, you allow the generalizations about litblogs to come true. And the thing is, this IS a litblog. But it's run by professional journalists. Even less reason for something so sloppy ever seeing the light of day here.

5:45 PM

 Lauren Baratz-Logsted said...

Personally, I think there should be more ot noys in the world.

It should also be noted that while newspapers have picked up the story of the AJC and the ensuing rallies and kerfuffles, it's the blogosphere that covers it continually, support for the cause originating on Critical Mass, which is - what else? - a blog. It's a shame so many people choose to cause divisiveness when really it's all common cause.

5:46 PM

 Marie said...

I'm a blogger and a book reviewer for online journals, I'll be the first to admit that my blog posts are not at all as well-reasoned or edited as my reviews. And I've read many "literary" blogs, including the elegant variations (and maybe that particular one has changed since the last time I was there; it was quite a while ago) are mostly dashed-off thoughts and links to things (like other people's reviews of books).

To make things worse, I often sense an agenda among certain literary bloggers as they boost the members of their cabal, while ganging up on people they decide, en masse, they don't like (like the Mark Sarvas/Steve Almond/ Ed Champion bizarre love triangle of a few years back). I would never say that print journalists do not participate in such shenanigans, but when they do so, they tend to make it a little more entertaining. Perhaps some bloggers need to study John Simon to understand how to take down their imaginary enemies in an entertaining fashion.

9:05 PM

 Rebecca Skloot said...

Thanks, Dan.

I should clarify: when I say that the opinions in posts don't belong to the Critical Mass bloggers, I mean they don't belong to them as a whole. Some of the posts are unsolicited and not associated with any CM blogger, but obviously many posts and even interviews can and do reveal the poster's opinions. My point is just that those opinions don't belong to the NBCC or all the other CM bloggers as a unit.

And Mark: That disclaimer does exist permanently at the top of the blog (on the left) just below the list of posters, and it applies to all posts. I tried to have it appear at the bottom of each post, but couldn't figure out how for the life of me (thank you, blogger). If this problem continues, someone may have to figure that out ...

10:11 AM

POST A COMMENT

LINKS TO THIS POST:

[BEA, We Meet Again](#)

[Dissing Allies: The Critics' War on Bloggers](#)

[On books as sweaters \(part 2 of 3\)](#)

[More Litbloggers and Blog Floggers](#)

[Maternal Feelings and my Poor Little Maggot](#)

[Indiscriminate Reporting](#)

[The problem with the campaign to save book reviews](#)

[Had enough yet?](#)

[A Question About the Big Picture](#)

[Important things first](#)

[Critical Mass of a Mess](#)

[Long Week](#)

[Frankly, Bloggers Lack Team Spirit!](#)

[STUPID PUBLICIST TRICKS](#)

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Fox illustration by Anik McGrory, blog created by Rebecca Skloot

CRITICAL MASS

the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

You will be forwarded to our new blog in 10 seconds. To go now, click here:
www.bookcritics.org/blog

5/18/2007

Lee Smith on the Changes at the Raleigh News and Observer

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. Today novelist [Lee Smith](#) writes about the changes in the literary life of Raleigh.



Last Sunday, May 6, the Raleigh News and Observer contained our excellent book review editor Peder Zane's [goodbye column](#), "Back to the Mainland," in which he likened the book pages to "an island off the coast of the News and Observer. While the rest of the paper reports the news of the day, we carry news of the spirit," he wrote, using one of my favorite phrases.

In fact, I once named a book "News of the Spirit," a phrase George Garrett had employed in critiquing a somewhat pedestrian and obviously commercial short story in a long-ago creative writing class. "It's very well done," he said gently, "but I'm not reading any news of the spirit here..."

No literature, that's what he meant. No serious discourse upon art, philosophy, history, religion, culture, morality, beliefs and ideas; no insight into how it is and what it means to be human in this world.

No news of the spirit, in other words. And we are not going to get much news of the spirit in the future pages of the News and Observer, either--not to mention the Atlanta Constitution and all the other newspapers that are "re-organizing" their book pages out of existence. Many smaller papers have already---quietly---stopped their own local books coverage, now relying on chain and syndicated columns and reviews.

But literature is relentlessly local, of course---whether the locale is Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha or Eudora Welty's Morgana or Wendell Berry's Port William. Writers are local, too. In the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill area where I live, you can't throw a rock without hitting a writer. If local books coverage stops, then the local writing community---with its corollary culture of literacy work,

WHAT IS THIS SITE?

Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the [NBCC Board of Directors](#) (see list of bloggers below).

WHAT IS THE NBCC?

The non-profit organization of book critics responsible for the yearly [National Book Critics Circle Awards](#).

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[Full blogger bios available here](#)

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readings, school visits, workshops, classes, and festivals of all kinds--- will have no voice, no forum, no billboard. Our cultural literacy will decline immeasurably.

Peder Zane wrote, "When newspapers diminish books, they diminish themselves." They also diminish the readers, who are being dumbed down from the top by corporate consensus. Zane's new job as "ideas writer" cannot possibly come anywhere near replacing all the ideas contained in all the books reviewed in depth and substance on a ny Sunday in his former pages. I'm going to miss him. We are all going to miss him, as we are all going to miss Teresa Weaver. But I have a cynical hunch that no matter how vocal our large literary community is about it, it just won't matter. It's all about money, and it's a done deal. Atlanta has called itself (famously) "The city too busy to hate." Now it's the city too busy to read. These big chains don't care. Books coverage doesn't bring in any money; and newspapers are all about money now, threatened as they are by the uncertain future of print journalism as a whole.

And on a very personal note.....what does this change mean to a novelist with a new book just out? I found out with my recent novel "On Agate Hill," published last fall. It was getting pretty good reviews most places----though fewer reviews, I felt, than with previous books. Then I got one really unfavorable review by an influential critic in a major city----which was reprinted in about 20 other newspapers that had cut back on their own local coverage and were using syndicated book reviews. I was talking to my husband about "all those bad reviews" the book got---this is my own negative sense of the experience, my feeling about it-----and he said, "Wait a minute! It got ONE bad review, carried in 20 papers." I was stunned to realize that this was true. But as newspapers decrease their own reviews, this scenario will happen more and more often to all of us, on a larger and larger scale. (I imagine ONE reviewer, finally, who will decide everything.....)

Another impression: I would take issue with the notion that blogs will somehow replace newspaper book reviews. During a recent visit with a local book club, a group of 16 well-read, highly intelligent women, I asked how many of them had recently read a book review on a blog. The answer was, nobody! Then I asked if any of them had EVER gone to a blog to read book reviews. Again, nobody. The average reader---the average person---just doesn't do this yet. Maybe we read reviews on Amazon, but that's it. Readers read book reviews because they happen upon them in the newspaper.--Lee Smith

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:14:00 AM



*What We Talk About When We
Talk About Change (Part...*

Star Tribune Retains Book Editor

A Quick Roundup

*What We Talk about When We
Talk about Stories*

*Howard Kurtz on CNN, Plus The
Guardian & Chef Gord...*

*A Conversation with Ibtisam
Barakat*

A Quick Roundup

Past Posts Of Note

*Reviewing 101: John Updike's
Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
routine, and feeling glum about
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful
Book Reviewing*

George Orwell on Book Reviews

Why Book Reviews Matter

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30
Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for
Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a
Novel and who's trying to ban
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
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*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain
Books?*

7 COMMENTS:

 [Dan Wickett](#) said...

I'm rather surprised that only with Ms. Smith's recent book has this issue of a single review being spread across the nation been the case. It's been that way since at least 2000, when I first really started to pay attention, knowing that I saw a single review of Alyson Hagy's Keeneland appear over and over again, ending up in nearly a dozen pages. I'll assume this was not really one of the first books this happened to.

As to the taking issue with the notion that blogs will replace print reviews? Most bloggers I know would take issue with that suggestion as well.

11:15 AM

 [Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

Thanks for your comments, Dan. The comments of those rooted in newspaper book review culture and those rooted in literary blogging culture is, I think, an understandable and not necessarily unwelcome sign of the passion felt about books and reading and literature. Access to highspeed online options is relatively new in many parts of the country (I see students and their parents lining up at the library in upstate New York where I spend summers, with limits of half an hour. They cannot read literary blogs, but will read the newspapers from New York, Albany, Saratoga Springs, and the local newspapers. There is a busy reading hour at the library, and lots of active book groups. We need to keep all readers reading, through various technologies and forms.

12:14 PM

 [Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

PS Peder Zane, the outgoing book editor in Raleigh, was NBCC Vice President/Membership until March, when he rotated off the board. The influence he had on the literary community of Raleigh was clearly profound. We appreciated Lee Smith's comments on his farewell column. (He also authored a compendium of "best books" by noted authors that is no doubt a reading group favorite by now.)

12:18 PM

 [Edward Champion](#) said...

Jane: I think you need to get your facts straight.

According to a Nielsen/NetRatings survey, as of February 2007, 80.16% of Internet users are broadband. This is hardly a "relatively new" development, unless you're stuck in Siberia with a stack of newspapers from 1998.

The more that the NBCC continues to keep its collective head in

*Writers Read Your Contracts
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This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad
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*Don't Know Much About
Counterinsurgency*

The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,
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*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review
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*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book
Editor, Minneapolis Star
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

Frank Wilson, Book Editor,

the sand and lash out at these emerging mediums (instead of working together with them), the more ridiculous and backwards it appears as an organization. Again, I ask: why the vitriol?

My offer stands open to sing "Ebony and Ivory" (or, if he prefers, "We Are the World") with John Freeman at a karaoke bar of his choice.

12:34 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

No vitriol in my comments. And not a problem with facts. I am speaking of those in this country who do have own computers, do not have Internet access, much less broadband access. The changes in technology will continue, leaving some behind at each waystation. The point is not the technology, it is the passion for reading and for literature which we all support in its various forms. As webmaster Rebecca Skloot reminds us regularly, the NBCC board's blog posts a variety of viewpoints; opinions do not necessarily represent the viewpoints of the board members.

1:45 PM

 Anonymous said...

How many people who don't have access to a computer with a decent internet connection DO have access to a newspaper with a quality book review section?

I don't believe that litblogs are a replacement for book review sections. But I also don't believe that there is a significant pool of people out there who regularly read the NYTBR but can't get on the web.

2:05 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

I grew up in a small town (population under 30,000) in the Midwest. My parents subscribed to the Sunday NYTimes and I read that book review regularly, along with reviews in the small-town newspaper and in the newspaper in the large city 90 miles away. And there are fine book review sections beyond the NYTBR.

4:30 PM

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5/18/2007

This from Susan Sontag, Plus Joshua Cohen, Book Editor of I.B. Singer's Publisher



Mark Oppenheimer's review of Susan Sontag's "At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches," in this week's "Jewish Forward," reminds us of one of the traditional roles of the literary critic: "[I]t seems unlikely," [Sontag] writes, 'that there are still masterpieces in major, intently patrolled languages waiting to be discovered. Yet some ten years ago, rifling through a bin of scruffy-looking paperbacks outside a bookshop on London's Charing Cross Road, I came across just such a book, "Summer in Baden-Baden," which I would include among the most beautiful, exalting, and original achievements of a century's worth of fiction and parafiction.' By the end of this essay, she has persuaded the reader of Tsytkin's necessity, incidentally offering meditations on a question that must have preoccupied Tsytkin himself: 'Loving Dostoevsky, what is one to do — what is a Jew to do — with the knowledge that he hated Jews?'

"But the essay is grander still," Oppenheimer continues. "Lauding Tsytkin, Sontag is asserting an almost forgotten role of the critic: someone who discovers new things for us to love. That was how Edmund Wilson saw the critic's job, but is that how James Wood or Lee Siegel sees it? Perhaps, and in any case, I admire both men. But maybe because they write in prominent places, and for the masses, they take fewer opportunities to share curiosities found at the side of the road.

Which brings us this addition to the ongoing dialogue about book culture from [Joshua Cohen](#):

This great Cassandra cry over the disappearance of book reviews and literary criticism (because they aren't the same thing) from the pages of our newspapers and magazines is a diverting little Apocalypse--though ultimately a tempest in a teapot, I have to think, which steams and pours, if you'll excuse a steep mixing of metaphors, almost exclusively

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for a virtual, or digital, thirst.

Today, information is incredibly dispersed--not only thanks to the Internet, and there on blogs such as your own, but also amid the print pages of many newspapers and magazines (yes, with Internet presences) whose "mainstream" visibility speaks nothing to the size and engagement of readership. I am thinking, primarily, of the paper I work for, the [Jewish Forward](#): to be found online and at your local newsstand, published weekly on trees.

I am writing this email entirely in a private capacity, and nothing I say here should be construed as any sort of official opinion. Each week, "The Forward's" Arts & Culture section, edited by Alana Newhouse, offers discerning coverage of Jewish books. This last month hosted reviews of such writers as George Konrad, Lamed Shapiro, Michael Chabon, Nathan Englander, and others. "The Forward" was founded in 1897 as a socialist paper, in Yiddish - it's retained its liberal, tough voice to this day. Trotsky wrote for its pages, as did Nobel laureate I.B. Singer...

Granted, Jewish bookery is a little self-limiting - but intelligent, self-critical community might be the very savior of literacy and what used to be called "discourse" in what's become a highly diffuse, and indirect, age.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:20:00 PM



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5/18/2007

Some Data to Add to the Mix

Recent [Nielsen/NetRatings data](#) released by the Newspaper Association of America:

Visitors to newspaper websites are online more frequently than other Internet users (72.6 percent versus 57.8 percent); 87.7 percent of them are online five or more times per week.

Newspaper readers are reading newspaper blogs; traffic to blog pages at the top 10 newspapers in the country increased 200+percent in the year ending December 2006.

Combined print and Internet readers of 49 daily newspapers account for more than 70 percent of the U.S.

Growth in online newspaper readership is double the growth rate of the overall online audience; a record 59 million people (37.6 percent of active Internet users) visited newspaper websites during the first quarter of 2007 (that's up 5 percent over the previous year).

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:14:00 PM



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5/20/2007

Nicholas Christopher on The Value of Book Reviews for Our Cultural Heritage

The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure those same owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter.



At a time when our social and cultural discourse is at a low ebb--reality television shows, attack radio, cheap voyeurism, an American president who cannot speak coherently, a government that reflexively lies, films that are ninety percent special effects and ten percent dialogue--it is particularly disheartening that major newspaper and magazine outlets would be cutting back or eliminating their book review/feature sections. How a page devoted to book coverage in daily editions, and maybe a dozen

pages in a Sunday newspaper, is deemed extravagant in periodicals that devote pages of ink to the drunken exploits (and rehab farces) of second-rate entertainers, replete with stories about their divorces, tattoos, automobiles, accessories, and underwear (or lack thereof) is disgraceful.

Where book pages are not being eliminated wholesale, they are being "merged" into so-called style sections, watered down and wedged beside low-calorie recipes, skin-care advisories, and restaurant plugs. Millions of Americans buy books, but apparently even the brief, cogent analyses of these books are considered insignificant by overseers of our corporate media.

Other industrialized countries with long literary traditions-- France, Japan, and Germany, for example--not only champion books by way of

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comprehensive newspaper reviews, but also regularly, often in prime time, sponsor in-depth author interviews on television. Newspapers in smaller countries like Greece, Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands sustain exciting, wide-ranging book departments.

We have serious problems with literacy in the United States, and it is not just shameful, but stupid, that we would compound them by becoming a country in which books, and readers, are simply not served by major periodicals. I am a baseball fan and a film buff, and no matter where I find myself, in big American cities and farflung towns, my interests in those subjects is faithfully served by periodicals large and small. That I cannot say the same about books is a scandal. We will pay a heavy price for abandoning our cultural heritage through such short-sightedness, denying the generations to follow us the opportunity to become active and vital readers. Without the latter, we can expect to produce, and nurture, even fewer writers, at which point we'll really be in trouble: a country with a diminishing national literature and an utter loss of civilized values.

I urge every periodical that has cut back on book reviews to reverse its pernicious policies and, not just restore, but expand its literary coverage, for the common good and for its own good. Do newspapers think they can survive in an arid, soulless intellectual landscape, devoid of literature? The publishing industry could do its part as well, supporting journalistic book pages by purchasing advertising space, not just for obvious blockbusters and self-help screeds, but for serious books across the spectrum: poetry, science fiction, intelligent mysteries, history, biography, and fiction of all kinds--a whole world of reading into which they could infuse marketing energy and publicity dollars. This is not a problem without solutions, if people on all sides accept what is at stake here in terms of our national--and, more importantly--our spiritual heritage.--[Nicholas Christopher](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:25:00 PM



3 COMMENTS:

 [scrimp](#) said...

I agree with you totally; bring back the book reviews, publish more book reviews to cover more than the books published by the top 6 in the industry. But most of all, rebuild the libraries of America....Lyn LeJeune
The Beatitudes Network
www.beatitudesinneworleans.blogspot.com - rebuilding the public libraries of New Orleans

11:55 PM

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 [Agricola](#) said...

I settled in for a reading of yet another piece supporting this subject, willing to lend a sympathetic ear, and then got this:

"an American president who cannot speak coherently, a government that reflexively lies,"

mixed into the stew of voyeurism, special effects in movies, et cetera. I don't think Christopher does himself or his cause any favors with his tendentious linking of our societal ills and a politically unpopular president. How can I, as a rational, informed reader accept any further conclusions from Christopher when he parrots the left's nonsense that our entire Federal structure "reflexively lies". He destroys his credibility with his apparent political bias.

6:48 AM

 [jimmy the hyena](#) said...

Oh look farmboy it's all a hoax and you know it. What do you even mean by the left? Does he really link societal ills and a politically unpopular (is he just politically unpopular? maybe a lot of people disliked his personality or something). Though I think a link should be made. The fact that Dubuya speaks English so poorly in spite of being the product of elite educational institutions Exeter (Rick Moody went there to no?) Yale, Harvard. It's about interest groups creating barriers that exclude persons and the misallocation of resources.

8:08 AM

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5/22/2007

How Book Culture in Lisbon Is Changing



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure owners and editors know that book sections and book culture

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matter. There are some 5,500 names on our [petition](#) to save the book editor's position at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution (it's not too late to sign). Today we have a dispatch from Lisbon, where Philip Graham, fiction writer, editor, University of Illinois professor, has been on sabbatical and covering the literary scene there for [McSweeney's](#).

For the month of May, Lisbon has officially designated itself as “a city of the book,” though in many ways that title could be applied to any month here, where writing and literature have a high profile. Even minor literary prizes are given notice in the press, and when the Portuguese surrealist poet and painter Mario Cesariny died in November, all the major newspapers devoted their cover page to the story, and a hefty chunk of the inner pages as well— the first seven pages of *Diário de Notícias* were entirely devoted to a retrospective of his life and work. It's hard to imagine an American newspaper honoring any writer in such a fashion.

Just walk through any neighborhood in Lisbon and you're likely to come upon a street or praça named after a writer. The street I live on honors a journalist, and from the window of my apartment I can just make out the edge of the Jardim Fernanda de Castro, a garden named after a writer of plays, poetry and fiction. Newly released books of

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[Vintage Edmund Wilson Coming Back into Print](#)

poetry receive at least as much attention as works of fiction (the genre of nonfiction is far from chewing up the literary landscape here, as it does in the States). One study reports that Portugal's rate of reading has increased, though a recent cartoon claimed the explanation was Portugal's aging population spending more time peering at the fine print of their various medication instructions.

Lisbon has gone all out in celebration of this month, with a larger than usual number of literary events scheduled. The huge Parque Eduardo VII hosts a book fair, there's a festival of films based on literary novels, and the National Library is offering an exhibition of the manuscripts and private papers of the great 19th century Portuguese novelist Eça de Queirós. So far this May I've seen a theatrical adaptation of Gonçalo Tavares's bitterly funny political fiction, *O Senhor Kraus*, at the Teatro Trindade, and caught an actor's solo performance of selected poems by Fernando Pessoa, at the Casa Fernando Pessoa, where I also attended a literary panel discussing the politics of book prizes.

Nevertheless all is not well in Portugal's literary scene. Just as in the United States, the review space for new books continues to shrink. Newspaper arts supplements like *Publico's Mil Folhas* and *Diario de Noticias' Sexta* have been discontinued, their usually expansive contents for the most part deconstructed into the stingy column space of the various daily editions. A biweekly publication devoted to literary matters, *JL (Jornal de Letras)*, soldiers on (though there's a consensus among writers that it could benefit from an injection of pizzazz), and the monthly *Magazine Artes* still offers good, smart literary coverage.

Writers like Jacinto Lucus Pires, whose novel, *Perfeitos Milagres—Perfect Miracles*—is being released next month, understandingly lament the loss of the reviewing venues. However, Gonçalo Tavares believes that the literary interview is a still vibrant form, one that many writers in fact prefer to reviews; there's more space devoted to one's book, and a writer being interviewed can have a say in how the work is represented. Even so, it has become increasingly difficult to bring a book to the attention of the reading public unless you're one of a host of television personalities and news anchors who now write novels and receive the publicity and sales that far more serious writers can't hope to achieve. The respected writer Rui Zink has found that his brief participation in a recent reality TV show as a judge (ah, only in Portugal—of the three other judges on the show's panel, two were fellow writers) has increased media interest in his latest novel, *A Espera—Waiting*.

It all comes down to the continuing flat or depressed sales of newspapers and magazines in Portugal, which have brought about cutbacks and even a certain dumbing down of otherwise fine publications. In a culture where respect and honor for writers is so deeply imbedded, this is especially sad.--Philip Graham

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 3:55:00 PM



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5/22/2007

This Just in from the Washington Post Syndicate. Discuss.

There has been much discussion in the news and in our industry about the fate of book sections, sparked in part by the announcement by the Atlanta Journal Constitution that they would be cutting the position of Book Editor to save money for the newspaper. Many other major newspapers are merging book reviews into other parts of the newspaper or cutting them to bone. When editors are scratching their heads about how to attract a broader and younger audience, it helps to remember the relationship between the newspaper and book industries, summed up nicely by this observation from author Michael Connolly in the Los Angeles Times: "In the past, newspaper executives understood the symbiotic relationship between their product and books. People who read books also read newspapers. From that basic tenet came a philosophy: If you foster books, you foster reading. If you foster reading, you foster newspapers. That loss-leader ends up helping you build and keep your base."

On Salon.com, David Kipen evaluates editors' attitudes to book sections in relation to reading habits of their readers in "Last Exit to Bookland."

And finally, there's a take by our own Kathleen Parker in her column, "America's March Toward Literacy":

We have received over 500 e-mails from readers across the nation praising her defense of the book review. If you are examining your book coverage, we'd like to suggest Book World, a comprehensive collection of daily book reviews from The Washington Post. This feature can add excitement to your book pages at a fraction of what it would cost to produce these reviews in your own newsroom.

Book World subscriptions include six daily reviews that are sent to you on Wednesdays of the preceeding week, and a Sunday collection of a dozen reviews sent on Fridays. The full package accounts for about 20 reviews that can be used as you have space in print, or in their entirety online.

We hope you'll consider a trial to Book World and make a statement to

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your readers that books are important to your community and to the culture in general, and that your newspaper will be the authoritative critic they need....

Karisue M. Wyson Executive Sales Manager Washington Post Writers Group

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:25:00 PM



5 COMMENTS:

[Ron Hogan](#) said...

So can any newspaper book review syndicate get a free ad out of the NBCC blog, or just the big two?

1:31 AM

[Dan Wickett](#) said...

Doesn't this idea also harm NBCC members - at least those not reviewing for the Washington Post? Unless I'm not understanding the offer - it is to syndicate the Washington Post book review section, correct?

How does something like that help Ms. Weaver at AJC, or any other editor watching their job be squeezed down to a mere page or so each week?

Not that I wouldn't appreciate having the AUTHORITATIVE critic showing up in my weekly Sunday paper.

8:51 AM

[lizzie skurnick](#) said...

Hi all--we weren't posting it as a show of support ;).

This is the second memo we've come across about other newspapers looking to profit off the dissolution of other book sections. So discuss!

9:03 AM

[Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

Here is a link to Rachel Sklar;s reaction to the earlier post about the New York Times:http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eat-the-press/2007/05/11/review-this-or-actually_e_48252.html

9:12 AM

Anonymous said...

Teresa Weaver, the book editor at The Atlanta Journal is a very fine book reviewer, and deserves much better than the AJC or the City of Atlanta.

*Vintage Edmund Wilson Coming
Back into Print*

*Nicholas Christopher on The Value
of Book Reviews ...*

*When two dozen critics argue over
a national award...*

Saturday Morning Roundup

*A Little Unsolicited Info on Critical
Mass, and It...*

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*This from Susan Sontag, Plus
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*What's Graphic and What's a
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*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing
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*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June*

The AJC has said that the elimination of the Book Editor is only done to enable it to better respond to the wishes of its subscribers. Sadly, this is absolutely correct. Atlanta is not a city of readers. It is a place where general interest independent booksellers are very few, and where the largest general interest bookseller is dubiously named "Chapter 11", and where the local civic hero is a well-known plagiarist.

But this is not the first time that the AJC has reacted badly to its book editor, having famously fired its wonderful book editor in 1993 for his legitimate literary criticism of the choice of Toni Morrison's for the Nobel Prize.

I fully expect to see fewer books reviewed in the AJC, but this will be balanced by a renewed critical concentration of Hip-Hop "music".

3:46 PM

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5/23/2007

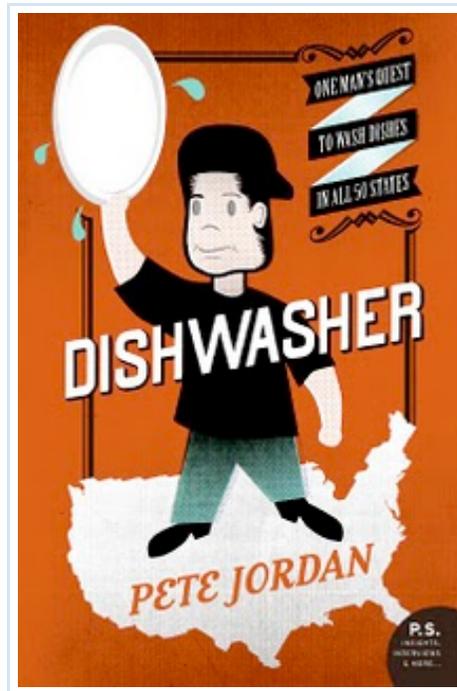
A Conversation with Harper Perennial Publisher Carrie Kania

*The National Book Critics Circle has launched a [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of *the campaign's blog series*, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure that owners and editors know that book sections and book culture matter. Here is a publisher's*

perspective.

Q. How do you let the world know about the books you publish?

A. We treat every book differently. We try to figure out who is the person we want to reach, and build it up from there. A lot of assumptions. We do a lot of work online. We have a [MySpace page](#). That's just a small thing we do. It certainly must be effective. There are readers online, as are bookstore owners and librarians and bookstore clerks.



It's a great way to get the word out. We depend on word of mouth. It's an old-fashioned but still effective marketing tool.

Q. But you're doing it in a new-fashioned way, if you're doing it online.

A. Things change and you have to be able to change with them. What we did 10 years ago may not be effective today. What we do today may not be effective in 10 years. We all need to be flexible and willing to experiment and try new things. We owe it to our authors to do that.

Q. What forms do you find effective online?

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A. Peer marketing, word of mouth. You grow to trust a website or friends. And whether that's a blog or a bookstore website or a MySpace page, it's important to get our books in the hands of the right people.

Q. Is there a bookstore website you can use as an example?

A. [Powells.com](#) does a tremendous job. I'm a big fan of their website. It's one of the best bookstore websites out there. It's the experience you get when you walk into a store. They've been able to replicate that experience online. Really hand selling, with recommendations, news, It's a nice informative website. They have a Powell's blog, with authors who guest blog. There are recaps of what is going on in publishing today, an award just announced, a book that was just reviewed. It's a good way to keep people interested.

Q. And literary blogs?

A. I know there has been a lot of discussion lately of the importance of bloggers to the industry. I think they are important. Whether you write for a newspaper or a magazine or you're just my mom, and you tell me about a book you like, I think opinions matter. The blogging community is important to the industry.

Q. Are there specific literary blogs you turn to?

A., I browse around. I have Google alerts about books I'm looking for. I'm a surfer on the web. And I'm always interested to see where my search leads me. I always try to take a different path. There are wonderful blogs. The guy who runs a website called [Chekhov's Mistress](#) is an interesting guy. We have sent him books, he has talked about the importance of poetry and literature in translation on his blog. He seems very smart.

[Bookslut](#). That's a great site. It's a smart site. They just did an [interview with Tao Lin](#), which I thought was really interesting. Ned Vizzini did the interview. Bookslut matches people well with people who are the reviewers. When you look at it and see the number of novels, nonfiction and poetry being represented on Bookslut, that's wonderful. It's very wide reaching, and includes poetry and translation. Bookslut was one of the first ones out of the gate who showed publishers that websites and blogs are important and they have something to say. Today authors like Nathan Englander participate on Bookslut. Maybe in 2002 that wouldn't have happened.

Q. Do you also go to print publications?

A. Yes. Newspapers, magazines, long lead, from the largest to the

How Book Culture in Lisbon is

Changing

PEN Announces "Beyond Margins" Winners

Vintage Edmund Wilson Coming Back into Print

Nicholas Christopher on The Value of Book Reviews ...

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Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey

To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June

smallest, are still an important backbone to the industry. We should do all we can to support them and help them exist.

Q. It's important to cover all bases?

A. Absolutely.

Q. Do you have an author out there now?

A. Today Chip McGrath wrote a great piece in the New York Times about a book we just published called "Dishwasher." Pete Jordan is the author. That was wonderful to wake up to this morning. Pete is embarking on a tour, doing events at stores like Quinby's in Chicago. He's at Atomic Books in Baltimore tomorrow night. He was on NPR Sunday. "This American Life." [He chronicled his dishwashing journey on the show.] He has "All Things Considered" coming up. We just did a great event at Mo Pitken's on Avenue A and Third Street. Talk about covering the bases, he has a [MySpace page](#). People magazine is going to run something. It's nice to see a book like this get nice wide coverage. He's on Bookslut right now.

Q. Any special plans at this year's upcoming BEA?

A. I'm going to be on a blogging panel at the Bookseller Day in Brooklyn, talking about how bookstores can get involved in blogging as a way of reaching out to the community via their websites. The [Harvard Bookstore MySpace page](#) has is friends with and links to the local coffee shop, local record shop, shops on Harvard Square. It's a community thing.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:52:00 PM



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LINKS TO THIS POST:

"I've got good news and bad news. The good news is, they all know ...

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5/24/2007

Sara Paretsky on the Number 7



The National Book Critics Circle has launched a Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. This post is part of the campaign's blog series, which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, a petition, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to make sure that owners and editors know that book sections and book

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culture matter.

Q: Shortly after you published your first book, you started an association dedicated to determining whether female crime writers were getting a fair shake in reviews.

A: Yeah, that's what *Sisters in Crime* did – or has done – is monitor book reviews. When we started, what we found – the *Druid Review* lists every crime novel published in the country published every year. So we had a count, how many were by women, how many were by men. And if you looked at it and weighted the numbers, we found a book by a man was seven times more likely to be reviewed in a national publication than a book by a woman was. So we said, maybe men write twice as well as we do, but we don't think they write seven times as well as we do. So we started writing publications – we'd just write and say you're not looking at books by women, and this is a list of books by women that we think merit attention that were published in the last quarter

[Scott McLemee](#)

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that we think you overlooked. We found we didn't have to be confrontational, that people were pretty responsive just knowing that we were looking at them. But then when we stopped monitoring they went back to the previous habits. So it's kind of an ongoing project.

Q: What was the response to this -- did you find that people were receptive to the idea that reviews could be more fair?

A: Yes, sure. Librarians make their buying decisions on reviews – you have to be reviewed in two, maybe three national publications before a library will buy a book – bookstores what they are going to stock is based on what's getting reviews, but if the book reviews are dying, what are they going to base their decisions on?

**

Labels: [Critical Outtakes](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:14:00 AM



2 COMMENTS:

[Lauren Baratz-Logsted](#) said...

"we found a book by a man was seven times more likely to be reviewed in a national publication than a book by a woman was. So we said, maybe men write twice as well as we do, but we don't think they write seven times as well as we do."

I found this fascinating and it addresses something that has long bothered me, but outside of the Brown University study of the NYT, I've never seen these kinds of numbers.

I do think that editors wondering at their dwindling readership need to consider that with women comprising 80% of the book-buying public, it is perhaps time they examine their own misogynistic tendencies when deciding what is reviewed and by whom.

1:57 PM

[Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

Thanks Lauren.You'd think!

4:59 PM

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LINKS TO THIS POST:

[more and more \(and then some\)](#)

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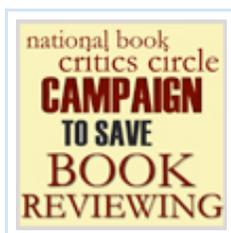
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5/29/2007

NBCC Campaign, Part 2



On April 23, the National Book Critics Circle launched a six-week [Campaign to Save Book Reviewing](#). This post is part of [the campaign's blog series](#), which features posts by concerned writers, op-eds, Q and As, and tips about how you can get involved to help preserve book sections and book culture. The campaign has been conducted mostly online, here on the NBCC board's year-old literary blog, Critical Mass.

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What's next? Having raised questions and aired conflicts (thanks, all, for your input), the NBCC will continue and broaden the discussion by sponsoring a series of panels at Book Expo America. (Details on the blog.)

The posts on Critical Mass over the past five weeks offer a snapshot of American literary culture circa 2007, which is evolving faster than many readers, authors and book critics can absorb. Solicited from authors, editors, journalists, book critics and others involved with books and literature, the posts offer a diverse and wide-ranging set of viewpoints--as might be expected from a group of critics and passionate writers and readers. Among them: Richard Power, George Saunders, Rick Moody, Lee Smith, Andrei Codrescu, Roxana Robinson, AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) president Catherine Brady, Sheila Kohler, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Richard Ford, Nadine Gordimer, Sara Paretsky, Stewart O'Nan, Lauren Baratz-Logsted, Adam Hochschild, Nicholas Christopher, Bill Roorbach and Abby Frucht's MFA students from Vermont College; book editors from the Los Angeles Times, the Washington Post, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, the American Book Review, the San Francisco Chronicle, the New Orleans Times Picayune, the Jewish Forward, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, as well as Bob Mong, editor of the Dallas Morning News, Mark Sarvas, who writes the literary blog The Elegant Variation, and Carrie Kania, who described an inclusive

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approach to getting the word out about books she publishes: print, radio, television, online, including MySpace pages, literary blogs, bookstore websites.(Read the blog and the comments for the flavor of the sometimes heated discourse.)

The related op ed pieces, editorials, interviews, literary blog posts, reports and reactions also are linked here. To name a few: Salman Rushdie on the Colbert Report, Scott McLemee in [insidehighered.com](#), Art Wallace in [Huffington Post](#), Bookbabe Ellen Heltzel on [Poynter.com](#), Michael Connelly in the [Los Angeles Times](#), David Kipen in [Salon](#), NBCC president John Freeman in [The Guardian](#) and in [BBC](#) and [NPR](#) radio interviews. Motoko Rich in [The New York Times](#), "Are Book Reviewers Out of Print?" and [The Los Angeles Times's](#) Josh Getlin, "A war of words breaks out between print and Internet writers as newspapers cut back coverage" focused on an artificial conflict between print reviewers and literary bloggers. "These generalizations are especially damaging because it gets in the way of an important truth --we're all pitching in to the same conversation," Freeman wrote in one blog post. "Whether it's on screen or in print, on a podcast or through the tabloid your subway seatmate has open on her lap next to you, this swirl of debate and opinion, cant and artful critique is all part of the same froth about books. It's how our culture thinks about itself, displays and digests its wisdom, gives a platform to intelligent (we hope) voices, and sifts signal from noise. Which is why the NBCC is prepared to fight for it -- smart, informed, well-crafted criticism is essential to our culture, to our democracy and to the improvement of our arts...[W]e wouldn't be staging this campaign from a blog, across the web, linking to bloggers and asking other bloggers to contribute posts if we didn't believe in the medium's capacity to bring intelligent debate to books. Nor do we believe that print reviews have a monopoly on good writing or contextualizing...But right now the fight that needs fighting is not for blogs (which are doing just fine), but print pages..."

Meanwhile, the sea change in newspaper book reviews continues:

*The [Los Angeles Times](#) combined its book section with the "Ideas" section; the book review's editors launched a blog and expanded online book coverage to include four monthly columns.

*The [Chicago Tribune](#) shifted its Sunday book review section to Saturday, with a smaller circulation (the book review is available online in a handsome pdf format).

*The [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) eliminated its book editor's position. The NBCC organized an [online petition](#) (last count, 5600-plus names, including Norman Mailer, James Lee Burke, Melissa Fay Greene, Chimamanda Adichie) and (with the help of Atlanta-based book publicist Shannon Byrne) a Read-In at the offices of the AJC attended by Atlanta booksellers, novelists, professors, readers. The May 3 Read-in was covered in [Publishers Weekly](#), [Creative Loafing](#), [Baby Got Books](#), [CNN.com](#) (Todd Leopold's "Who reads books anymore?" drew dozens

Critical Outakes: Khaled Hosseini on the Plight of...

Reminder: Three Big NBCC Panels at BEA

Thursday May 24 Roundup

Sara Paretsky on the Number 7

A Conversation with Harper Perennial Publisher Car...

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Why Do Critics Ignore Certain

of comments), The Wordsmiths blog, and Atlanta-based television.

*The Raleigh News-Observer eliminated its book editor's job and shifted the editor, former NBCC board member Peder Zane, to Ideas columnist (he wrote his farewell column on May 2; novelist Lee Smith responded on Critical Mass later that week).

*The New York Times Syndicate, taking advantage of the cutbacks in book pages around the country, offered a package of book reviews to make up for the lost content. The Washington Post followed suit.

*The Minneapolis Star Tribune cut staff to the bone (but not the book review editor).

*The Columbus Dispatch book editor launched a book-related blog.

*The UC Berkeley Journalism school has named as its new dean Dianne Lynch, dean of journalism at Ithaca College. An online specialist, Lynch founded a national association for online journalists, wrote a textbook on digital media ethics, and created a student film festival for movies shot on cell phones.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Upcoming Events](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 10:55:00 AM



1 COMMENTS:

[writingdoctor](#) said...

Whatever happened to Western New York in your list of places holding recommended book events? Look into Rochester New York next time. Please.

What with the weather and an insular character, Rochester is peopled with readers and book club members.

Nancy Yanes-Hoffman at www.writingdoctor.typepad.com or nywriter@rochester.rr.com

11:25 AM

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5/31/2007

Where are We Going, Where Have We Been



THIS AFTERNOON, at 4:30 PM in the Paula Cooper Gallery at 521 West 21st Street (over at 10th Avenue), the NBCC and Bookforum will cohost a panel about the culture and history of the book review. As readers of this site will no doubt be aware, we're in the midst of a massive shift in priorities in the news business, and the NBCC's Campaign to Save the Book Review has tried in its own immodest way to draw attention to what's been happening at newspapers with regards to the

book review.

In the space of a just a few months, several of our major newspapers have cut back their book sections (The San Francisco Chronicle) moved them to smaller print run days (The Chicago Tribune), folded them into joint sections (The Los Angeles Times), eliminated or not replaced their book editor (Raleigh News & Observer, Atlanta Journal Constitution), or just cut back on coverage in general (Arizona Star, LA Weekly). And the news keeps coming. More across-the-board cuts are on the way at several major newspapers -- cuts which will affect not just book criticism, but all of the arts -- even as [strong empirical evidence exists to suggest head-count slashes always backfire](#).

So this is the culture now of the arts in America in our most popular print forum -- the newspaper, which (in spite of all the bad news) [still has an average weekday readership of 124 million](#), or 57 percent of the adult population. There is good news about books in other arenas --

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[NBCC Campaign, Part 2](#)

literary journals, television shows, radio, blogs, some online sites of print newspapers, some magazines and even online booksellers are doing new things with criticism -- but it would be a grave mistake for us to just step off the profligately burning boat of the newspaper industry and simply watch as it abdicates its role of providing for a large audience smart and intelligent coverage of literature.

Tonight's is the first of three panels the NBCC is hosting at BEA that will touch on this environment. The panelists at the Paula Cooper Gallery will be National Book Award winning novelist and critic, Joyce Carol Oates; president and publisher of Farrar Straus & Giroux, Jonathan Galassi; Executive Editor of Humanities at Harvard University Press, Lindsay Waters; and James Shapiro, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. Eric Banks, editor-in-chief of Bookforum, will moderate. You can still RSVP by emailing nbccrsvp@hotmail.com.

We hope you can make it, for we are at a critical moment, [one that calls to mind an essay that Lindsay Waters published about the academy in the Village Voice](#) just three years ago (when there still was a regularly appearing Voice Literary Supplement). Here's a section worth thinking about:

"The humanities must now take steps to preserve and protect the independence of their activities, such as the writing of books and articles, before the market becomes our prison and the value of the book becomes undermined. It was not always so. John Milton once wrote that good books are "the precious lifeblood of a master spirit." Today the humanist should look back to such expressions of illuminated belief. The task is to engage in constant re-examination. If humanists do not keep firmly in mind what they are about, no one else will. Humanists study books and artifacts in order to find traces of our common humanity. I argue that there is a causal connection between the corporatist demand for increased productivity and the draining from all publications of any significance other than as a number. The humanities are in a crisis now because many of the presuppositions about what counts are absolutely inimical to the humanities. When books cease being complex media and become objects to quantify, then it follows that all the media that the humanities study lose value."

**

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:28:00 AM



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 King said...

The ULA would be crashing that elitist BEA panel if the admission requirements and fees weren't so restrictive. Keep out the voice of the people.

Such panels will go nowhere until truly contrary voices presenting new ideas for saving literature are allowed into the arena.

12:21 PM

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6/05/2007

Report from BEA Crisis in Newspaper Reviewing Panel (Including a Bit of NBCC News)



Among those on the NBCC-sponsored a panel on the crisis in newspaper reviewing at the [BEA](#) on Sunday morning were three editors from newspapers in various stages of turmoil and transition, raw from the latest round of cutbacks (there is

nothing quite like the sting of being laid off, cut back or "voluntarily" bought out; Elisabeth Kubler-Ross once described it to me as equivalent to the stages of grieving, which explains some of the emotional nature of the [NBCC's Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)). Also on hand: three panelists from outside the newspaper world, and NBCC president John Freeman as moderator. (At left are panelists Mike Merschel, Maud Newton and Oscar Villalon.)

Freeman started out with news: The NBCC board has come to a consensus to present a new award recognizing excellence in a book-related publication, web site, or section. Then to the panel.

First up: two editors whose newspapers have drawn much attention on the NBCC Board blog, over the last year.

Melissa Turner, new features editor for the [Atlanta Journal-Constitution](#) (she was handed the job a few weeks ago after 25 years on the news side), described the reader reaction to the elimination in April of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution's book editor position as "Oh my God, how could you!" (The NBCC's [online petition](#) and May 3 "Read-in" outside the AJC's offices emphasized the concern this had elicited in the literary community in Atlanta and beyond.) Turner said the restructuring of the newspaper will not cut the amount of space devoted to [book coverage](#), but there will be changes in content: national reviews

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will be wire copy; commissioned reviews will focus on regional authors.

Turner did not mention it, but the AJC is fourth (behind the Washington Post, the New York Times and the Boston Globe) among newspapers that added substantially to readership via online editions, according to a recent [Scarborough study](#). The AJC added 10 percent to its weekly reach through online readers (I suspect they could add even more if they were to make their Website more user friendly).

[Mike Merschel](#), newly minted books editor at the Dallas Morning News, described his efforts to keep the book pages from looking too much like "a line item that could be zeroed out in the next round of budget cuts." (In the audience, former Dallas Morning News literary critic Jerome Weeks, whose [farewell column](#) appeared here in October; Weeks now blogs as [BookDaddy](#).)

In March Merschel introduced a new book blog, [Texas Pages](#). "I started this thing in desperation," he said. "It's a new way of talking about books." It's also a way of proving readership to the bean counters. Before the blog, reader response to the section ran in the hundreds a week; the blog tallies traffic of about 1500 a week. Despite the shrinking of the arts staff, Dallas still has a book section, and still runs the same number of book reviews, largely freelanced, he said. The writers of the print book reviews are paid; those who contribute to the blog, not.

[Oscar Villalon](#), San Francisco Chronicle book editor (and three-time thumb wrestling champ) described the morale at his newspaper, which just announced it will eliminate 25 percent of its staff or 100 people, as "in the toilet." Newspapers are "wasting away" but readership is up, he said, putting his finger on the newspaper dilemma du jour: "Online numbers are through the roof. The newspaper hasn't figured out a business model to make money from those internet readers." The general approach in cutbacks is to eliminate international and even some national coverage and focus on local. "I'm not sure what this will mean for the book review," he said. If the changes to come mean making the books coverage local, he said, "you marginalize your own content."

Also in town from San Francisco: panelist Stacey Lewis of [City Lights Books](#), who bemoaned the loss of the Village Voices's Voice Literary Supplement, which highlighted at least five first-time authors or "writers on the verge," a year. (Panelist Heidi Julavits made that list in 1999.) "We count on the alternate presses," she said. "The VLS was a great advocate for small presses like City Lights." With the downsizing of newspaper book review sections, and the homogenization of reviews (one wire service review going into dozens of newspaperS), the chances for a small-press author to gain review attention dwindle.

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Why Do Critics Ignore Certain

Heidi Julavits, novelist (her third, [The Uses of Enchantment](#), came out last fall) and founding editor of [The Believer](#), is a champion of the long-form review; her publication originally indicated no review would run under 4,000 words (she mentioned that she particularly loathes the 650-word review). Among her observations: Miranda July's first short story collection, "No One Belongs Here More Than You," published a few weeks back, has barely been reviewed, but is selling well, thanks to July's [website](#). (The fact she is a performance artist, filmmaker, etc. doesn't hurt, she conceded.)

Julavits pointed out an economic truth: "Novel writing is a labor of love, you cannot make a living running a blog or writing book reviews. It's about diversification and embracing the fact these all are labors of love."

Literary blogger [Maud Newton](#) reminded us that she makes a living writing about tax law; the blog is a hobby. She said she doesn't read the daily newspaper in print, and most under-35 readers don't either (although she might do so if she couldn't get it online). "The false opposition that has been set up between newspapers and bloggers puzzles me," she added, as does the animosity sometimes expressed. "Blogs drive traffic to newspapers."

Oscar Villalon interjected a comment: "The animosity comes from our bosses saying, 'This is what's killing us.'"

"With all due respect," Newton said, "your owners need an exercise in basic logic," which led to another comment about the need to maintain book coverage in newspapers that seemed to gather consensus. "There is nothing more foolish than a newspaper's cutting the proportion of the people who love to read."

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:46:00 PM



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6/06/2007

Book Reviews Are Essential Tools for Librarians



For Heidi Julavits, a review might be a leisurely conversation or a little piece of art. For Francine Prose, it's ethically suspect if it isn't interesting. Folks at the NBCC's "Crisis in American Book Pages" panel at BookExpo America seemed to agree that the reason we all struggle to find the perfect phrase (or the perfect reviewer to write that phrase) is not to sell books, and both this panel and the NBCC's

"Ethics in Book Reviewing" panel readily dismissed the review as consumer report.

From my perspective as editor of the book review at *Library Journal*, this is stimulating stuff but somewhat perplexing. (It also seems willfully naïve; I suspect most people pick up, say, the New York Times book review simply to see what to read, which requires a book purchase somewhere along the line by someone, if only the willing librarian.) For my readers, the reviews LJ runs aren't entertainment over morning coffee; they're business, and I'm not too fussed that my job is to run straight-shooting commentary aimed at helping librarians decide what to buy and what not to buy. At the NBCC "Book Pages" panel, former Dallas Morning News book columnist Jerome Weeks mentioned from the floor that a farewell letter he received from a librarian explained that she needed his reviews to justify purchases. That seemed to surprise a lot of people, so let me explain.

After a lean few years, book budgets at public libraries are rebounding, and they're not inconsiderable. Last year, according to *Library Journal's* annual book-buying survey, libraries serving populations of 500,000 or more had book budgets averaging \$3.3 million. That's a lot of books, and certainly libraries have got to go beyond my 5,000 to 6,000 reviews a year to get useful commentary (not just spin) on what

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to buy. More to the point, many public libraries require one and sometimes two reviews to justify purchase as a matter of policy; they can't simply rely on a sales rep's pitch. Think about it; they're spending public money, and they want to do it right.

There's more. Librarians obviously can't read all the books they recommend and discuss with patrons, and there's nothing like a good LJ (or [Dallas Morning News](#)) review to move along the conversation. Librarians can draw both content and context from reviews to provide what in professional parlance is called readers' advisory, and for that purpose it's really valuable to have a range of reviews instead of cookie-cutter wire copy. Finally, books do get challenged, and when that happens (as it does hundreds of times a year nationwide), it can be crucial to produce an encouraging review from a reputable source.

So, reviews as entertainment or part of the great intellectual conversation? Yes, librarians read them that way, too; they're among the biggest book nuts on earth. But reviews are really the tools they need to help other people do their reading. All of which is to say that cutbacks in review space across the country really hit libraries hard, right where they do their core business. --Barbara Hoffert, NBCC Board Member

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 10:40:00 AM



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6/14/2007

Modest Proposals -- a Dispatch from the NBCC Independent Press Panel

Newspapers may be eating their young when they cut or kill book sections, but then again, the young are already disappearing in droves, aren't they? The question has probably been under-addressed in the National Book Critics Circle's Campaign to Save Book Reviews, but the underlying demographic truth was evident in a panel held last night, jointly sponsored by the NBCC and the New York Center for Independent Publishing.

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On the panel, moderated by NBCC president John Freeman, were: Dan Simon, publisher of Seven Stories Press; Sarah McNally, co-owner of McNally-Robinson Booksellers; Hannah Tinti, author of *Animal Crackers* and editor of *One Story*; M.A. Orthofer, managing editor of the web-based *The Complete Review*; and Tim W. Brown, a freelance reviewer who is a frequent contributor to *Rain Taxi* and an NYCIP executive committee member.

The panel circled the general topic of independent publishers and the diminishing newspaper space devoted to book reviews. Dan Simon commented that at best, there can be a "wonderful electricity" surrounding a book that begins with reviews, yet added the caveat that reviews also "carry less weight" than they used to. Picking up from there, Sarah McNally observed that websites tend to drive the younger book-buyers to her store, and while she expressed concerns about the effect on our national literature of diminishment of reviews in print, the fact is that on an individual basis, some inspired reviews sell books, but that many reviews seem to have no perceptible effect. Hannah Tinti observed that cutbacks in regional print reviews might have the greatest deleterious effect on emerging writers, who depend on notice more heavily than do established writers. Tim Brown noted that while his early work was reviewed in the largest newspaper sections, he wonders whether that would be the case today. Michael Orthofer, most interested in the possibilities of the Internet for access to multiple sources of information regarding books, and for interconnectivity, said

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it should not be seen as a replacement for print but a complement.

As ameliorative efforts, the suggestions were many. Brown called for proactivity on the part of reviewers to call attention to work that deserves it, and said there exists a “sick symbiosis” between a highly dysfunctional industry (trade publishing) and a declining art form (reviewing). Speaking of working the cracks in the façade, he touted alternative publications and said independent publishers “have to be highly imaginative to get the word out” about their work. Simon, alluding to the hurdles faced by smaller presses, said it was important to understand the interconnectedness of the parts: that independent reviewers and independent publishers and independent bookstores were part of a community of the like-minded, with shared interests. McNally reported that she will not purchase paperback books without review quotations on their back covers, for without those, the books don’t sell. Tinti called for “as much book reviewing as possible,” whatever the venue. A couple panelists cited the loss of the “accidental” reader as part of the likely fallout of cutbacks in regional book sections.

The influence of book prizes was discussed briefly, McNally noting that the Man Booker is the prize that seemed to call attention to books most strongly. In the question period, the tight window of timing reviews to publication dates was debated, mostly as a drawback, and the lack of vibrancy in the writing to be found in book sections was commented on by several attendees.

--Art Winslow

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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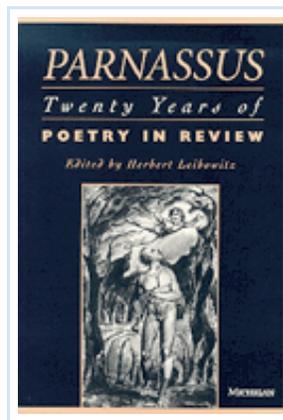
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6/15/2007

Dangling from a Blurb? Let's Think about Parnassus



If book-review defenders rushed to Atlanta mere weeks ago to protest the seeming death knell of book reviewing at that city's daily newspaper, then why not flock any day now to West 89th Street in New York City with signboards, chants, and sit-ins on our minds? For *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, the international literary journal of poetry criticism edited by Herb Leibowitz in that locale, will soon cease publication after thirty years of publishing continuously.

Even as American newspapers gradually shed their book reviews—and with them, reviews of classical music (“Newspapers Trimming Classical Critics,” *The New York Times*, June 9)—it is easy to forget, but should be easy to remember, where else to go for critical writing. There are big commercial magazines, for instance, although too many of them will give more space to a review of a book about Princess Diana than to anyone's unheralded (or heralded) first novel, let alone first poems. There are online venues, although their recipe for brain-pinching brevity and eye-straining jumble will not please everyone.

And then, there are the literary journals. Why not go to them?

Well, because (oddly) few of these include book reviews or literary criticism as an important or emphatic item in their table of contents.

No one seems to be protesting the absence.

Granted, book reviews would take space away from fiction, poetry, and essays, the traditional mainstays of literary journals. Then, too, book reviews require time, effort, and editing from editors. This is especially

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true of book review sections containing a dozen or more reviews, less true of the intermittent two or three reviews per issue. Book reviews can also make editors enemies—or, if not, then can exist mainly to butter up what was already buttered.

Certain journals, though, have done well by book reviewing. [Sewanee Review](#), for one, publishes its book reviews up front, before anything else in its pages, even before the magazine masthead. Every issue carries this section of ten or so, which range by way of subject in the current number from a biography of Ogden Nash published by Ivan R. Dee to a reconsideration of [Batya Gur's Israeli mystery series](#), while also including Sewanee editor George Core's critical survey of current literary journals. [Antioch Review](#) publishes a book review section, in the rear. [Poetry magazine](#) publishes critical roundups, longer critical essays, and critical debates, on occasion. [Hudson Review](#) is known for its periodic critical chronicles, [Boston Review](#) for its smart short and longer reviews. [Harvard Review](#) publishes the most hefty section of twenty, more or less, in every issue, and these short reviews tend to feature poetry more steadfastly than they do any other genre, unlike Sewanee.

Still, it is nearly impossible to find as the consistent core of any literary journal with lifespan long, subtle, substantial critical review-essays about poetry that do not serve the mind-boggled career of a striving assistant professor. (Long ago, that striver was probably yanked from the hope of being read by anyone but a tenure committee. This can impose peculiar linguistic demands on critical writing.)

All of which reminds me that, once upon a time, the poet Rodney Jones remarked, "Without Parnassus: Poetry in Review, American poetry would be dangling from a blurb."

Before we begin dangling, consider what we'll be losing when we lose Parnassus: its writers, such as those below.

- "Poets, in order to please, must 'say' something in their poems, but poems can please without saying much about their writers."

--Isaac Meyers

- "I've fallen and I can't get up. It's my own fault, of course, since the flight I've tumbled down is the Sylvia Plath Problem, and I agreed to hazard the descent as blithely as if the request had been casual—'April, while you're up, could you just check on the Plath Problem, there's a dear.' If only there had been a chorus of friends and family, like the audience at a horror movie, clutching sweaters to their faces, screaming and pleading, 'Don't go down those stairs!' But would I have listened?"

--April Bernard

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• “Remember Hitchcock’s malevolent birds, restless with anticipated carnage, awaiting the instant of rending? Think ‘poetry critics’ summoned by an instinct similarly mysterious and murderous to the place where some defenseless anthology has appeared. The more ambitious the anthology, the more savage the attack.”

--Helene J. F. De Aguilar

• “Of course, imagination doesn’t only function as survival’s valet. Sometimes the servant becomes saboteur.”

--Diane Ackerman

• “News flash: The Vatican has announced that the Pope and other ranking church clergy have begun writing secular poetry in Latin, warping the ancient phrases of Vulgate and Mass into stylish, sophisticated odes to wine, women, and song”

--Jay Ladin

• “Opening a ‘selected poems’ is like opening a box of chocolates. The connoisseur will look immediately for the familiar swirl on the praline, while the novice taster will nibble off corners and the dedicated sweet-toothed student will consume the full pound, row by row. The pleasures of tasting are obvious; the danger, of course, is all in the mix: Who assembled the package? what’s missing from the confection? and how nourishing is it? As a kind of Whitman’s Sampler, rather than an overview, a ‘selected poems’ cannot cater to everyone, cannot even reconstruct a publishing history—take New Directions’ scanty selected Williams, for example, or Ashbery’s eccentric choices. What we can hope for is that the poet or his or her editor will give us the most tempting ingredients and demand of us a willing and responsive palate.”

--Susan Lasher

• “Myself, I draw the line at words like ‘incommensurable’ and ‘mystic,’ but that is perhaps my loss. I really do find poetry commensurable with life—not ‘mystic’ (which for me would lessen its wonder) but rather entirely within the realm of human power, however rarely that power appears.”

--Helen Vendler

• “There are some who want language to be a clear broth. Stone. Light. Milk. Soul. Darkness.

“But there’s also a bowl of broth asquiggle à la Pollock with thick

egg noodles, with involuted vegetables sprouting hairs and wearing

wens like lavish boutonnieres, with floating sargassos of tripe, or

matzoh balls so fully lunar you’d think that they would

[Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)

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[The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review](#)

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The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors

[Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine](#)

[Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

[Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter](#)

[Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer](#)

[M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder](#)

[Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)

[Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel](#)

[Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic](#)

[Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post](#)

[Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist](#)

[Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle](#)

[Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

warp the field of gravity in the bowl. *Seiche. Grommet. Hoochi-koo. Incunabula.*

Houghmagandy.

"The language is a hobo stew, a ragout, an up-to-the-elbow search in the haggis."

--Albert Goldbarth

Now ask yourself, where else could you find prose like this about poetry? Answer: only in Parnassus. Alas. Unfortunately.

--Molly McQuade, NBCC member

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 11:15:00 AM



3 COMMENTS:

Dan Green said...

"No one seems to be protesting the absence."

At The Reading Experience I've been protesting their absence for years. I protested their absence in a post responding to the last Critical Mass post on this subject. Perhaps if you folks spent more time reading the literary blogs about which you seem so confident in making airy generalizations, you wouldn't keep making these kinds of uninformed statements.

12:40 PM

Richard said...

Herb Leibowitz is, of course, the ultimate person responsible for all of those blurbs, as well as the entire extremely valuable enterprise of *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*.

I think it's important to celebrate Herb's vision and accomplishments. I first met Herb when I was an M.A. student in English at Richmond College (now part of the College of Staten Island) and I have never stopped being impressed by his seriousness (and playfulness), his commitment to literature and his energy.

He's irreplaceable.

6:01 PM

Anonymous said...

Parnassus closing its shop is the saddest thing recently to happen to American letters. I'm heartbroken and bereft. I'm on the verge of tears. But Herb Leibowitz deserves rounds and

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing
Editor, Publishers Weekly*
*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,
Philadelphia Inquirer*
*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*
*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*
*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*
*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*
*Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*
*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*
*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*
*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*
Richard Powers
*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*
*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*
*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*
*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*
Q & A with Kiran Desai
*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*
*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*
*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*
*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

rounds of applause.

Kelly Cherry

10:47 AM

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CRITICAL MASS

the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors

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www.bookcritics.org/blog

6/20/2007

A Conversation with Chicago Sun-Times Books Editor Cheryl L. Reed



In the course of the National Book Critics Circle Campaign to Save Book Reviewing, launched in late

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Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the NBCC Board of Directors (see list of bloggers below).

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Jane Ciabattari

Rigoberto Gonzalez

Mary Ann Gwinn

James Marcus

Maureen McLane

April, Critical Mass has featured conversations with book editors from around the country. Today, books editor Cheryl L. Reed of the Chicago Sun-Times, a newspaper which has faced uncertainty since Conrad Black, the CEO of its parent company, stepped down in 2003 (closing arguments in Black's federal fraud trial in Chicago were ongoing this week), takes some questions.

Q. How long have you been book editor at the [Chicago Sun-Times](#)? How was the section structured and what was its content upon your arrival? And now?

A. I have been books editor for a little over a year now. The previous editor retired after holding the position nearly 35 years. His background was in copyediting, whereas I'd come from the news side as an investigative projects reporter who had also written a book. So, we had very different perspectives and experiences. Since coming to the section I have expanded our freelance base — the number of people who write for us. We've also added a copy editor, a person to help me open books and some other support staff for help with event listings. My freelance budget was expanded slightly, so I was able to hire more freelancers and cultivate more local reviewers, which I am continuing to do. I'm continuously pitched by freelancers who live in other states who want

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

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[NBCC Finalist Eliot Weinberger on What to Read Thi...](#)

[Around the World on Wednesday NBCC Finalist Aleksandar Hemon](#)

to review for me. I am trying to cultivate a community here and you can't do that when someone isn't reading the paper and doesn't know the writers in town or where they read.

Q. What is your approach to focusing your book section on your readership?

What has worked? What has failed?

A. My focus has been widening our reviews in the kinds of books we review as well as the age and sex of reviewers. I've actively sought more female and young reviewers. As I wrote earlier, I'm aggressive about getting local reviewers. Chicago is a big city and there are a lot of writers here. Many don't want to write for the relatively small fee we offer but since we've been making the section better they are coming around asking to do reviews. At the same time, I realize we are a mainstream newspaper so I try to cover the gamut. We try to work on our mix of reviews. I do more graphic novel, food, and music books because I realize these appeal to different audiences. I also added poetry and politics to the types of books we review. I experimented with themed sections. My main thrust has been in highlighting local authors and mainstream authors who come to town. We do a lot more interviews with authors now and I encourage our reviewers to take an attitude. I want our section to be entertaining and engaging even if readers don't go out and buy all the books we review. I want "Books" to be a talked-about section, which I'm told by my editors and people in the community that it is becoming. Our managing editor last week told me that he reads the reviews because he finds them interesting, not because he necessarily wants to know about a certain book. I think that's a good sign.

What failed? Probably poetry reviews and trying to get readers to contribute short reviews. People just don't like to write to the newspaper like they used to...Oh well.

Q. Would you describe your commitment to local author interviews, listings, and other elements? How much space do you have for books coverage?

A. We have five broadsheet pages every Sunday as part of an expanded section called "Controversy" that also include the editorial pages. We have an artist and a designer and virtually all the art work is original. Getting the designers to put more copy on the page is a struggle but I think the art work enlivens these pages and gives the section a certain energy that I don't see in a lot of books sections. We have one full broadsheet page devoted to local authors, events, and interviews every week. We do Chicago authors elsewhere in the section as well. But I could safely say that at least 30 percent of our space is devoted to Chicago and Illinois authors, and probably 40 percent if you include Midwest authors in that mix.

on What to Read 1th...

*Nathan Englander on What to
Read this Summer*

In Other News

*Jessica Stockton on Out of the Book
Late-Day Roundup*

Burger King was all the Rage

*Whitney Terrell on What to Read
this Summer*

Saturday Roundup

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*Reviewing 101: John Updike's
Rules, which he admits
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of
criticism and his writing
routine, and feeling glum about
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful
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*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30
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them?*

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*The Rest of the Best: The Books
That Didn't Make it Onto the
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and
Why in the NYTBR Best Book
Survey, scroll through the June
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain
Books?*

Writers Read Your Contracts

Q. What are the challenges you have faced?

A. Well, Conrad Black is on trial. We don't know the outcome yet but there is speculation about whether or not he could ever take over the paper again, despite being the largest shareholder. I don't want get into newspaper losses. It seems dismal every quarter. That's a matter of public record. We are a struggling newspaper. I personally think it is the commitment made by the publisher that keeps our section alive and running on Sunday. Ultimately every books section is a vanity press — pride of the publisher — since we don't make money. The challenges will be whether the current management will remain in control, should the paper be sold, and whether new owners would want to continue a section that has virtually no ads. We have managed to attract a few ads recently, though.

Q. How has the newspaper promoted the book section?

A. We now have a half-page ad in our own paper every Friday touting our Sunday "Books" section. Management has given me a few more resources and they have made a commitment both to me and publicly in the paper that they have no plans to decrease books coverage. When the "Chicago Tribune" books section began publishing on Saturday, the "Chicago Sun-Times" carried front-page promos that bragged that we are the only books section in town on Sunday...The "Sun-Times" top editors often do "refers" to our pages in the must-read section and they've backed me up when other editors have tried to cut our reviews space.

Q. What sort of online presence do you have? Do you have a book blog? An online community? How do you think that will grow--what do you expect in a year's time?

A. All our reviews are run online. At this time I don't do a book blog. It's something I'm considering and in the future this is the area we will be expanding in. There's only so much time in the day, however, and I'm reluctant to devote my time to something we don't charge for yet.

Q. Can you mention a few recent and typical reviews and interviews?

A. I typically write two to three columns a month. These are usually reviews of big books and often I interview the authors. The reviews run on the cover of the section and take up most of the entire page and then jump. Recently I interviewed Sara Paretsky. Last week we ran a full-cover review of "[A Thousand Splendid Suns](#)." In the past I spent a day with Jane Hamilton. That interview ran with five pictures and took up a double truck (two broadsheet pages). Other interviews have run in the daily newspaper. I chatted with Nora Ephron and Anna Quindlen when they were in town. We just ran a full-page treatment of [Barbara Kingsolver's book](#) and others about organic eating. I just wrote the

Earth to Academia

Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics

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Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post

Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist

Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle

Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle

Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly

Frank Wilson, Book Editor, Philadelphia Inquirer

review of the new Joyce Carol Oates novel, which I'm sure will raise eyebrows. I focus most of my reviews on narrative nonfiction (my background; I wrote a narrative nonfiction book about nuns in 2004 called "[Unveiled](#)") and popular literary titles, many of them written by women. The paper's top editors often say that our books section is one of the most beautifully designed and most engagingly written sections of our paper. This is not what you'd expect at a tabloid.

Q. Anything else you'd like to mention?

A. I think having come from the news side of the newspaper has helped me open up the books section to people who felt shut out. I rely on reporters from all sections of the paper to do interviews and I also employ the publisher, editor, and general manager as reviewers. I think this is critical because they feel they have a stake in the section, too. This Sunday, our general manager, John Barron, has the lead review on Martin Cruz Smith and the most clever review I've read yet on the Clinton book, "Her Way." He's a fabulous writer and reviewer and this is the only writing he does anymore, so I think he gets a kick out of it. The same for our publisher, John Cruickshank, who is somewhat of a philosopher and quite well-read. He writes reviews of our big think books. He also did the cover review of the Ian McEwan, which encompassed much of McEwan's works.

I think sometimes books sections can be too insular and too snobbish. I think our section is working because we're trying to write engaging reviews that are interesting on their own merits, not just as reviews. I also try to cultivate people who don't write reviews for a living. This will be unpopular with your audience, but I find people who aren't full-time reviewers sometimes spend more time with their reviews and offer more interesting viewpoints. This isn't always the case. I encourage our reviewers to take strong points of views. We are a tabloid so we feel we're entitled to have some fun. I've insisted that reviewers' taglines be somewhat clever and funny. I've found that full-time freelancers often can't break out of the mold and the volleying of plot developments. I want my reviewers to write essays about books, not plot points.

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 3:45:00 PM



1 COMMENTS:

BlueBerry Pick'n said...
she quit.

& GOOD ON HER for it.
[Chicago Sun-Times Editor Resigns Over "Wholesale Rewrites"](#)

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,
Entertainment Weekly*
*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,
Hartford Courant*

Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers

*Convergences With NBCC Winner
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie
Moshin Hamid on Camus,
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of
2006*

Richard Powers

*Simon Prosser on What People are
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

Q & A with Kiran Desai

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and
Different Cultures and
Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda
Adichie*

5 Questions for Amy Hempel

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping
Work Under Her Hat*

of Obama, McCain Endorsements

Bloody Conrad Black, a wart on my beloved Canada.

~~~

*Spread Love...  
... but wear the Glove!*

**BlueBerry Pick'n**

can be found @

"ThisCanadian

~~~

"We, two, form a Multitude" ~ Ovid.

~~~

*"Silent Freedom is Freedom Silenced"*

12:33 PM

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*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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6/24/2007

## Deja Vu All Over Again in San Diego -- and What You Can Do



ONE OF THE WORRIES skittering through U.S. culture pages this spring was that the latest round of cutbacks might create a domino effect -- and that book sections held in high regard for the depth of their coverage would become vulnerable to [the current less-is-more philosophy sweeping newspaper boardrooms](#).

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This fever has unfortunately settled in at the [San Diego Union Tribune](#) (as has long been rumored). This weekend was the sign off for its stand alone book section at [signonsandiego.com](http://signonsandiego.com), a terrible irony as throughout the spring the paper was praised for its resilience. "Would you believe the plucky San Diego Union Tribune?" [David Kipen](#) asked in his piece, "[Last Exit to Book land](#)."

But it looks like once again there will be a goal line stand, as Kipen would have called it. Literary agent and long-time San Diego force Sandy Dijkstra (who earned her Ph.D. in French literature at UCSD) has been forwarding an email which reminds this battle has been fought and won in the past.

"Some of you may recall that some years ago, we faced a similar crisis of losing our Book Review. At that time, we circulated a "chain letter with a civic purpose", describing the San Diego reading community via stats and then, presenting a threat: IF the Book Review were not restored, we, the readers, writers, booksellers and publishers of San Diego, would evoke the spirit of Fahrenheit 451 and descend upon the offices of the San Diego Union-Tribune, bearing a coffin filled with the books of the many authors whose works would no longer be reviewed. We would then stage a READ-IN until we got news that our needs would be addressed. This threat, together with a deluge of chain letters hitting Mrs. Copley, forced the paper to restore the Review."

Dijkstra is encouraging readers to resurrect this spirit and write in to Union Tribune editor Karin Winner at ([Karin\\_winner@uniontrib.com](mailto:Karin_winner@uniontrib.com))

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

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[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

[Art Winslow](#)

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[Why Reviews Don't Really Address the Writer](#)

[So disguise shall, by the](#)

Union Tribune editor [Kath Winnel](mailto:Kath.Winnel@uniontrib.com) at ([Kath.Winnel@uniontrib.com](mailto:Kath.Winnel@uniontrib.com)).

Similar campaigns have in fact worked in the past (in San Diego and San Francisco) and at least brought the AJC into closer contact with readers and the publishing community about its decision to eliminate its book editor position. It may have even helped prevent deeper cutbacks at the Minneapolis Star Tribune. So speak out if this bothers you.

Some other things you can do:

--Contact [local booksellers](#) and [publishers](#) find out what they plan to do.

--Write in to [local radio](#) and [television stations](#) (where is [Ron Burgundy](#) when you need him?!)

--Contact the [literature department at the University of San Diego](#) (where writers as diverse as Rex Pickett and [Kim Stanley Robinson](#) earned their degrees)

--Write in to the [Union Tribune's op-ed page](#).

--Pickett

All the reasons why the Union Tribune's decision is a bad one [have been reiterated on this site](#) and in panels which the NBCC has hosted. Newspaper book sections encourage reading, they help jump start conversations about books, they support the livelihood of writers, the importance of knowledge and skepticism, and they reach a lot of readers.

We all know newspaper sections aren't perfect, but any suggestion that this section had it coming would be an absolute canard. The paper featured the kind of long, in-depth, well-written and well-edited reviews which have become a rarity in newsprint. It didn't just cover local writing -- it highlighted African literature of the Diaspora, the [best of young British novelists](#), and books on the [cultural meaning assigned to virginity](#).

In short -- through the stewardship of Arthur Salm, this was a section which brought the muchness of the world -- as it is represented in books -- to readers in a sophisticated fashion, and looks to be no more. Newspaper consumers, especially women, have continuously said this kind of coverage matters to them, and yet newspaper owners continue to go against that knowledge. Some newspapers have even proven that [marketing this part of their Sunday section](#) can actually improve ad sales and maybe even circulation.

So it makes good community sense, good business sense, and good cultural sense to keep a section like this running -- and yet, here we are. Sometimes, the community of readers needs to talk back. If you care about books and the intelligent discussion of them, sound off, write in,

*disguised...*

*Royal Court in the Catskills*

*Where a Writer Wants to Go*

*During Deadline Time*

*Alain de Botton on What to Read*

*this Summer*

*Around the World on Thursday*

*A Conversation with Chicago Sun-*

*Times Books Editor...*

*NBCC Finalist Eliot Weinberger on*

*What to Read Thi...*

*Around the World on Wednesday*

## **Past Posts Of Note**

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*Rules, which he admits*

*breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of*

*criticism and his writing*

*routine, and feeling glum about*

*the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful*

*Book Reviewing*

*George Orwell on Book Reviews*

*Why Book Reviews Matter*

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30*

*Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for*

*Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a*

*Novel and who's trying to ban*

*them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also*

*Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing*

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*The Rest of the Best: The Books*

*That Didn't Make it Onto the*

*NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'*

*Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and*

*Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

*Survey, scroll through the June*

*'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain*

call in, talk to people who feel the same. And let's work together in trying to turn this around.

-- John Freeman

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:31:00 PM



## **5 COMMENTS:**

Lisa Hunter said...

The problem with the write-in approach is that most letters come from people who have never bought a copy of this newspaper in their lives, and never will. A better strategy might be to organize a long list of people who would buy subscriptions if the paper kept its book coverage. If we ourselves aren't willing to support book culture, how can we ask a newspaper corporation to do so?

2:17 PM

Jello said...

Freeman, you ever been to San Diego? Having lived there for nearly a decade, let me tell you that I once thought that San Diego was Spanish for apathetic. Pickett? Oh man. Good luck.

3:23 PM

John Freeman said...

Many times in fact -- You're right, it never struck me like the kind of place that said homeland of radical uprising, but then again Salm's book section arose from its sun-drenched boardwalk, so I'm warily optimistic that another loud message to the paper could turn things around. And it would be great if people who write in DO read the paper. That happened quite a lot in Atlanta and it did change some things.

4:09 PM

David Thayer said...

Ron Burgundy? He rules the world.

11:28 AM

Cinematheque Films said...

And then there are some of us who are quite happy (more than ecstatic) to see these dinosaurs go. The fundamental notion that I as the reader do not have enough sense to decide on my own what books I will buy is patently absurd. It is condescending and patriarchal. Get a clue. Book reviewers are not performing a public service. Most of them are snide and typically misrepresent both books and authors and if it's the gospel truth you're looking for you won't find it in a book review. Some arrogant idiot at the New York Times Book Review calls one of my books

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## ***The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors***

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*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter*  
*Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer*  
*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder*  
*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune*  
*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel*  
*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic*  
*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post*  
*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist*  
*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle*  
*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle*  
*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly*

NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW CALLS ONE OF MY BOOKS "disturbing." Good. The book was about AIDS and it's disturbing, but the reviewer was writing in code -- a bad habit for this stupid group -- she was referring to SEX not AIDS. Enough with your codes. Sometimes you do get what you deserve and the publishing community deserves to be downsized. It has become increasingly irrelevant and the fact that these antiquated review sections are being thrown into the trash heap is precisely where they belong. -- Tim Barrus

5:53 AM

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6/28/2007

## Focus: San Diego Book Section Cutbacks on KPBS Broadcast Today

Word on the cutbacks in San Diego's book review section has begun to filter out into the mainstream media. The Los Angeles Times took note of it on their blog, [Jacket Copy](#), on June 22, and San Diego's local NPR station KPBS is hosting a conversation today on their call-in arts show "These Days" at 12:40 PM EST. The guests will be NBCC president John Freeman and San Diego Union Tribune's editor of special sections [Chris Lavin](#). (Lavin urged arts journalists and editors to make arts coverage more like sports coverage--more storytelling, less secrecy, more marketing-- in a speech to the Association of Performing Arts Service Organizations in May 2002.) More about today's broadcast on the KPBS [blog](#).

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 11:45:00 AM



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6/29/2007

## One Less Part of the World



ONE OF THE GREAT losses of the recent cutbacks at the Star Tribune in Minneapolis will be the end of the paper's world pages.

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Not only did the section cover developments around the globe, it occasionally did so through books. For the past year and change, [Courtney Peifer](#) (pictured here on the right) brought in stories about Wole Soyinka, Nadine Gordimer, and Dario Fo, among other writers, using features on these writers to send readers in the direction of news about the countries they hailed from. In the ecology of art and information in American life, the demise of this sort of hybrid species in a daily newspaper is a terrible thing -- for it makes the superspecies of newsprint (sports, pop culture, scandal) that much more privileged, whether the reader wants it to be or not.

\*\*

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 9:11:00 AM



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7/03/2007

## The Graveyard of the Database



Because it had started to rain and I was on campus anyway, I stopped in at the [University of Central Missouri](#) library with the idea of catching up on a few small-press reviews of poetry books. I took the shining glass elevator to the mostly empty periodicals floor, passing a couple banks of computers on the way, and walked to the shelf where the current issue of [Virginia Quarterly Review](#) usually sits. It wasn't there. Neither could I find [The Kenyon Review](#),

[The Antioch Review](#), or [Sewanee Review](#). Figuring they were all being re-catalogued, I asked the reference librarian how I could find them. "Oh, those?" he said. "They've all been canceled. Hardly anyone ever reads them, and, anyway, they're all available in a database." When I protested — I admit I became a little bit spluttery— he merely reasserted his original premise: People don't read them. People like databases. Databases are where it's at.

And as I looked further, I found that it wasn't just those four magazines. The library had relegated [Poetry](#), [Michigan Quarterly Review](#), and many others to the databanks. To save money and space, no paper copies will be available for readers ever again.

If this were merely an eccentricity of my little arm of the permanently cash-strapped Missouri higher education system, I'd have registered my complaints and walked away. My guess, however, is that little of this kind happens at my library that isn't already a trend elsewhere. And,

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*[Footnote to Reading the World](#)*

*[Cindy Dach on What to Read This](#)*

beyond my own admittedly sentimental attachment to the printed page, there are a number of reasons why this is a bad thing.

Unlike, say, [The Journal Of Agricultural, Biological and Environmental Statistics](#), magazines like [The Kenyon Review](#) are edited not to convey the results of scientific studies or new discoveries for a limited audience of scholars and scientists. Rather, their aim is to bring a unified and interesting reading experience to a general audience. Moreover, according to Virginia Quarterly Review editor Ted Genoways, "Our Summer 2005 issue, for example, included nonfiction by Gabriel Garcia Marquez and fiction by Isabel Allende, but their shared agent (Carmen Balcells) denied electronic rights, so if libraries dump the paper copies of that issue, those parts of the issue will cease to exist. And the comics by Art Spiegelman don't translate well—and certainly the inserts and fold-outs we've run can't really be digitized at all. And that really bothers me." Or, according to Kevin Morrissey, Managing Editor at VQR: "Journals are in a no-win situation when it comes to signing up with the database companies: if we don't, we're resisting new technologies and not adapting to readers' new expectations of content delivery; if we do sign up, we marginalize our print edition."

From the point of view of the book reviewer, this situation is possibly graver. The titles mentioned in this blog are among a select group of magazines that regularly feature reviews of small-press books, the kinds of books that are almost always overlooked by newspapers and glossy magazines. As such, they have consistently been a source of news to people who care about such things, offering information about who has published what new (otherwise unadvertised) poetry book, providing critical assessments of various small-press authors' latest innovations and developments. To offer these only on databases may be wonderful for researchers fifty years from now, but probably at the expense of the contemporary readership for whom they are intended. (Or, as my colleague Jim Obertino put it, "I do miss the paper copy of *Victorian Studies*, which I regularly consulted, but now rarely if ever will because it is only available online.")

Meg Galipault, the Managing Editor at the excellent *Kenyon Review*, observed that, so far, databases haven't had a big effect on sales of the magazine and, she said, either way, "we still get paid ... I suspect, though, that eventually libraries will do away with periodicals completely and only offer access through the online services they subscribe to." I'm willing to admit that, for librarians, there are many good reasons to adopt databases. They make storage easy, they hold an unimaginable amount of information, and they cost less than subscriptions (though, for the most part, litmag subscriptions go for about \$20-\$30 per year, one-fiftieth the cost of a new computer). But when I ask myself whether I'd continue to write for these magazines if I thought my reviews were destined immediately for the graveyard of the

*Summer*

*Maureen McLane's Early Summer*

*Reading Notes*

*One Less Part of the World*

*Daniel Woodrell on What to Read*

*This Summer*

*One Question for Ander Monson*

*Around the World on Friday*

*Laila Lalami on What to Read this*

*Summer*

*Why the Buzz: Check Out Shalom*

*Auslander Video*

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*Reviewing 101: John Updike's*

*Rules, which he admits*

*breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of*

*criticism and his writing*

*routine, and feeling glum about*

*the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful*

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*George Orwell on Book Reviews*

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*Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for*

*Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a*

*Novel and who's trying to ban*

*them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also*

*Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing*

*in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books*

*That Didn't Make it Onto the*

*NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'*

*Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and*

*Why in the NYTBR Best Book*

*Survey, scroll through the June*

*'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain*

database, I have to say my answer would be no. And that, I'm afraid, is where we may be headed, at least at our libraries.

--Kevin Prufer, NBCC board member

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 11:30:00 AM



## **5 COMMENTS:**



**K.G. Schneider** said...

I'm a little surprised you just realized this has been happening.

The point is not how much a computer costs. The primary reason to drop print is that library serials budgets are stagnant while serials costs are rising--not for literary magazines, which as you note remain remarkably modest (\$35 for the library subscription to *Kenyon Review*), but for the journals that drive the peer-engine review of academia. These have been sharply escalating for fifteen years.

The trade-off, you correctly observe, is the loss of the in-hand print journal, a cohesive intellectual effort often carefully organized thematically and visually. I am hardly a Luddite, yet I feel wistful that so few people understand what they are losing.

To retain print titles for literary magazines requires a relatively small commitment of the library's serials budget. Yet library budgets are generally tight to begin with, and the departments that would advocate on behalf of the *Kenyon Review* or the *Antioch Review* are often late to realize that the titles they want are on the chopping block. Without concerted effort on behalf of these journals, they are easy targets for cuts.

To this protracted problem add the new postal rates which unfairly privilege large companies but may quickly shutter some small journals.

Some journals have responded by going online and looking for other support models than subscriptions. Nobody writes for small journals for the income, after all. I'm not suggesting this is a satisfactory answer to your complaint, given how much joy it gives me to receive a literary journal in the mail and read it end to end, but the online journal (clumsy as it is to read) is at least one survival model.

(Of course, then there are schools that never subscribed to literary journals, for whom the databases \*add\* value, even if it is scattered... though that's another issue.)

It will take more than one tweaked-off academic complaining to

Books?

*Writers Read Your Contracts*

*Earth to Academia*

*Medical Apartheid: Research*

*Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*

*Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon*

*Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?*

*This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad*

*Review*

*Don't Know Much About*

*Counterinsurgency*

## **The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors**

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time  
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,  
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,  
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review  
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book  
Editor, Minneapolis Star  
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,  
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning  
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver  
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post  
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,  
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San  
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing  
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Book Review Editor*

the weekend reference librarian to change this, if you think it needs to be changed. You cannot make the databases go away (and really, would you want to?), but if you consider literary journals to be more than buckets of binary digits yearning to be set free (which is, I think, what you and I believe -- that these journals are more than the sum of their parts), you'll need to get some support from your peers in the humanities departments.

12:40 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

thanks for the thoughtful comment. any organizations that would coordinate such an effort?

3:13 PM

 K.G. Schneider said...

Sorry, I missed the response to this... I can't figure out how to subscribe to comments on this blog.

Hmmm... crossover groups... I spoke about the threat to small journals at the latest NASIG conference (North American Serials Interest Group); I wonder if this is an issue that AWP or the Writer's Guild would get interested in. Is there an association of small journal presses? Where do the humanities academics congregate... MLA?

6:00 AM

 Peter Murray said...

For what it's worth (and I'm not sure what you'd expect from someone whose moniker is *The Disruptive Library Technology Jester*), I'll vouch for Karen that she is no Luddite. I don't think the issue is one of blind computerization, however. Rather it is grasping for efficiency in the face of the explosion of information.

I would propose that the major cost of putting that journal on the shelf is not the \$35/year price. Instead, it is likely to be the cumulative effect of the processing of that physical piece -- receipt (getting it in the mail), check-in (and claiming the issue if it does not arrive), physical processing (everything from barcodes to property stamps), shelving, binding (pulling, collating, shipping and reshelving) -- and the actual cost of the space in the building. In the case of the mega \$4,000/year journals, these processing costs are dwarfed by the cost to acquire the information, but at the price point the literary journals represent the processing costs become a concern.

My technologist side can come up with a dozen ways of readdressing the issues in a digital world, but I'm at a loss to come up with adequate ways to address the physical world problems. Perhaps it is the value-added cost to be absorbed by the library in its effort to provide this information to its constituency. If so, I suspect it will take a hard-nosed

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,  
Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,  
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,  
Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner  
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC  
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.  
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie  
Moshin Hamid on Camus,  
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay  
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an  
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of  
2006*

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are  
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's  
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's  
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War  
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating  
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing  
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha  
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and  
Different Cultures and  
Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda  
Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*

cost/benefit analysis to make the case.

9:53 AM

 **K.G. Schneider** said...

"Yeah, but...": Peter is a wise man (despite that silly jester hat), but let me suggest that while the journal certainly costs more than \$35 a year to maintain, in the scheme of things, it's not that much more, and furthermore, it's the JOB of that library to maintain those subscriptions (my same beef with libraries that charge for interlibrary loans: why are these an exception to your service rule?).

I'm familiar enough with the budgets of academic libraries to say, show me your budget and I'll help you save those journals. I would bet in most cases they weren't dropped intentionally; it was a case of needing to make major cuts--due to the Voldemorts of peer-review publishing--and not understanding what is lost when these journals are cut.

I have also spoken with several colleagues who work in collections who cannot even tell me what the economic model is for online indexing, and how the wholesale dropping of print titles affects the revenue model for these journals. I find this disturbing. I were in charge of making a life-or-death decision, I'd make it my business to be aware of the outcome of my actions.

11:25 AM

POST A COMMENT

### **LINKS TO THIS POST:**

[The statue on the green: the fate of small literary journals](#)

[Two books and a library journal](#)

[An Open Letter to Myself](#)

[The Gateway of the Database](#)

[What I Could Blog](#)

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7/03/2007

## San Diego Update: Sandy Dijkstra to U-T Editor Karin Winner



*The literary community of San Diego said good-bye to the stand-alone book section of the San Diego Union-Tribune on the last Sunday in June. (The [Union-Tribune](#), lest we forget, won a Pulitzer for national affairs reporting last year.) Literary agent [Sandy Dijkstra](#) has sent out alerts and monitored the situation from her longtime home base in San Diego. She sent us this report after seeing the new form of books*

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- [James Marcus](#)
- [Maureen McLane](#)

coverage:

The community of San Diego has no option but to give SDU's new format of inserting book review coverage into the Arts section a chance. In a KPBS interview late last week, NBCC president John Freeman expressed many of our concerns about the loss of a free-standing Book Review, and about the lack of guarantees, going forward, that book review coverage will increase, rather than decrease. Now that I have seen the new Sunday format, I can see that it offers certain advantages, while not diminishing the potential disadvantages. Here is my latest letter, to Karin Winner, Editor of the U-T:

Dear Karin,

Having heard in more detail about it from Chris Lavin on the Tom Fudge show last week, now that I've seen the Sunday ARTS section, I

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

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*[Footnote to Reading the World](#)*

have an even better sense of your plan. Indeed, it is appealing to us book people to find ourselves “integrated into the Arts section” (and “expanded onto a new web site”). How can one not welcome your new plan as articulated by Arts Editor, Jim Chute’s statement that the U-T is “committed to honoring” our “oft-expressed interest in books” and the promise that you will be “adding more books coverage throughout the daily newspaper”?

Obviously, one cannot. One has to give it a chance. Yet, I would ask that you consider the following, as we go forward:

1. What do we lose when we lose a free-standing Book Review section? NBCC’s John Freeman was eloquent on this subject on last week’s Tom Fudge show: we lose our own address, a section we can save to read when we can savor it; a space that is dedicated to books.

2. What do you lose if you don’t live up to your promise to extend this coverage daily-wise, now that the Review is gone? Your readers, unless you can truly live up to Mr. Chute’s promise on Sunday.

3. Are we gaining or also losing inches in this new format? Are we getting fewer books reviewed: Yes, you will say, those daily reviews will add up, and we hope they will, but will they match or even exceed the space that was accorded to reviews in the Review section? And, what guarantees will we have, after this launch, that the U-T will remain committed to book coverage in the dailies?

4. Do you need to do this? As a reader of THREE Sunday papers, when I stack the NYT vs the LAT vs the SDU, size-wise, the Union wins by a long shot. (Of course, I’m aware that the national NYT is not as hefty as the East Coast version, but I wager that the U-T would stack up well against that edition too.) My point is that even though the U-T’s revenues may not be quite as HUGE as they have been in past, you still own San Diego, so we book readers must wonder why you cannot afford to continue the Book Review, especially when other sections are being kept, although they too have little advertising?

5. Which leads to a related question: Are all sections treated equally? As I go back through Sunday’s paper, apart from the news section, I count Family, Home, Currents, (which has almost NO ads), Passages (ditto!). How many of your (many!) sections pay for themselves, I wonder? Certainly not the Financial section either, which has almost NO ads. (The Our Region section would also be ad-less, were it not for Wal-Mart campaigning for a new store in town.) Yet, you continue these sections because each provides a needed service to your readers. Doesn’t the Book Review do the same?

As a business owner, I fully realize that you must make good business decisions, and only time will tell whether this is such a decision. Book

[Cindy Dach on What to Read This Summer](#)

[Maureen McLane's Early Summer Reading Notes](#)

[One Less Part of the World](#)

[Daniel Woodrell on What to Read This Summer](#)

[One Question for Ander Monson Around the World on Friday](#)

[Laila Lalami on What to Read this Summer](#)

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[Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future](#)

[The NBCC's Tips For Successful Book Reviewing](#)

[George Orwell on Book Reviews](#)

[Why Book Reviews Matter](#)

[The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30 Books in 30 Days](#)

[How We Choose Links for Roundup](#)

[What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?](#)

[Pub Date? What Pub Date? also Embargo Follies](#)

[On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books](#)

[The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey](#)

[Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey](#)

[To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)

[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?](#)

readers are your bread and butter, and I've already seen an email calling for us to all cancel our subscriptions in protest. I will not do that, but like many of your loyal readers, I too will be watching and hoping that this "expanded" coverage indeed does materialize! (The early signs, I must admit, are promising: How thrilling it was to open this morning's U-T and to discover a review of Lisa See's PEONY IN LOVE (albeit not a good one!), especially two days before she's due at Warwick's (hopefully, in future, that info will be provided!).

At the LAT, I am told that inches devoted to book coverage actually INCREASED with the new format (half-Review, half-Opinion section), and hopefully, the U-T will want to make that happen here!

Sincerely,  
Sandra Dijkstra

\* Hopefully too this new format and daily coverage will allow you to employ LOCAL reviewers instead of those syndicated ones too often present in the past due to budget constraints. We readers get those elsewhere, and want to hear what our fellow San Diegans are thinking and saying!

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:10:00 PM



### **2 COMMENTS:**



Anonymous said...

The main newspaper in San Diego is called the "Union Tribune", not the "Times Union." There is no "Times Union" in San Diego.

11:59 AM



Jane Ciabattari said...

Thanks for the correction.

6:36 PM

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7/10/2007

## By Stating the Problem, Do We Help a Bad Idea Along?

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*Maureen McLane*



I just hope it doesn't backfire.

I'm talking about the NBCC's laudable effort to save book reviewing. Philosophically, I can't be anything but 100 percent in favor of it. After all, I've been book review editor at The Kansas City Star since March 2000. I certainly would like to continue in that post -- and to continue believing this culture has not given up on books and all they represent.

This year, 2007, marks not one but a couple interesting passages for me. In November, I'll turn 47. I started getting paid for journalism when I was 22, so I'm coming up on a quarter century in this business now. Remarkable as it may seem to me now, I've spent more than half my life dedicating myself to a concept: That the free exchange of ideas is a key component, perhaps THE key, to a democratic nation. If you disagree with that, then disagree with a Founder -- Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed his preference for newspapers without government over government without newspapers.

2007 also marks seven years for me as book review editor. Before that, I worked as a features copy editor, news copy and wire editor, and reporter of various stripes, including police reporter and environmental reporter.

I have nothing against what some journalists call "hard news," though I

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don't like the phrase. It implies that everything else -- the writing of editorials, opinion, critique, even sports -- is "soft," or weak and unimportant. I always wanted to be in the critique realm of this business; fool that I am, I believe an understanding of the arts is as important to our freedom as is our responsibility to vote, stay informed about domestic and international issues, and so forth.

If you disagree with that, then disagree with the NEA. Its "Reading at Risk" study found that people who do not read for pleasure are less likely to participate in our democracy, too.

That finding did not surprise me. Literature -- whether rooted in fact or fiction -- helps us engage with our fellows. Their joys, their plights, their sufferings and their triumphs; all these things are reflected in our pages, and should be.

The NBCC is rightly worried that the news pages these days care less and less about the pages of books. I won't rehash the NBCC's observations regarding the shrinking or disappearing book sections in this country; you can navigate this site for yourself to see those.

And I can't really find fault with the NBCC calling attention to this trend in hopes of arresting or reversing it.

What I do worry about is that it could have the exact opposite effect that was intended.

I've been around journalists a long time now. I sure as hell don't understand all of them, but if there's one thing I believe quite firmly, it is that editors tend to look over their shoulders. To be more blunt about it, the nation's newspapers routinely take "story ideas" from one another and recycle them. If that's too much trouble, they just pick up wire stories and run those. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with either practice, as long as plagiarism is avoided.

But journalists tend to think alike, too.

I absolutely GUARANTEE that somewhere in America, some editor(s), reading of the NBCC's campaign to save book reviewing, reacted this way: "Hmm ... shrink or kill the book reviews? Now THERE'S an idea ..."

At The Star, things seem saner these days. I can't speak on behalf of the newspaper, nor would I ever make predictions about journalism of any kind, anywhere -- I've stopped trying to do that. But I can say that it is a matter of public record that we've already been through this. In the 1990s, before I became book review editor here, the two-page Books section was removed from the Arts section, reduced to one page, and

[07/07/07 Roundup](#)

[Beirut by the Book](#)

[Dog Days of Summer Reads: Steve Weinberg](#)

[Critical Outakes: Gunter Grass on Memory](#)

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[Dog Days of Summer Reads: Mary Ann Gwinn](#)

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[Reviewing 101: John Updike's Rules, which he admits breaking.](#)

[Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future](#)

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[George Orwell on Book Reviews](#)

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[Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey](#)

[To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)

[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?](#)

placed in Opinion.

The readers did not like this -- and they let management know about their dissatisfaction. For several years, they wrote letters, contacted the ombudsman, made phone calls. The two-page format was restored early in 2000, and moved back to Arts.

Our Arts section is called A&E now, but no matter. Books is back where it belongs, if I may be so bold as to voice my opinion. True, my two pages are a bit smaller in the wake of our recent redesign, but I've found ways to cope with that. We're also trying to increase our books presence in FYI, which is our features section. For now, all is well.

Nationally, it isn't. And I just hope the NBCC is successful in making things better. I have to ask, though: Did the campaign change any minds, really, in Atlanta?

Things change. Societies evolve. The Internet is not going away, barring some catastrophic event (I'm trying not to grin right now; I confess I sometimes have a rather twisted imagination). And as things change, journalism reflects those changes. There is an old, old tension in this business: Are we supposed to be a catalyst for what is "right," or are we supposed to be a mirror or reflecting pool, showing society its true nature?

Historically, that tension has been healthy. Journalism has been populated by crusaders and chroniclers, and while their methods and ideals were not always in accord, their broad GOAL surely was: To keep the free exchange of ideas flowing.

I personally think it would be terribly lamentable for the nation's newspapers to diminish books coverage. To do so would be to put a knife to our own throats.

But the most disturbing aspect of this whole thing is the larger cultural question. Are newspapers, in cutting books coverage, really just reflecting a society that cares less and less about books? Are we becoming a nation of people who prefer what I call "garbage" information -- inaccuracies or inanities or both -- over information that is factual, imaginative, truly enlightening?

If so, then we are in big trouble. If that's not the case, then newspapers that are giving up on books coverage are trying to impose a shallower, more harried, and less interesting view of the written word upon their readers.

They wouldn't do that.

*Writers Read Your Contracts  
Earth to Academia  
Medical Apartheid: Research  
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics  
Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon  
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?  
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad  
Review*

*Don't Know Much About  
Counterinsurgency*

## ***The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors***

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time  
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,  
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,  
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review  
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book  
Editor, Minneapolis Star  
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,  
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning  
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver  
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post  
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,  
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San  
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing  
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*

Would they?

Hmm ... now THERE's an idea ...

--John Mark Eberhart, book editor of the [Kansas City Star](#)

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 2:57:00 PM



### **2 COMMENTS:**



Richard P. said...

This is a nice piece about serious issues -- I hope some of these newspaper editors read it -- but what the hell is up with this link from that crazy moron Ed? How totally awesome he has finally approved of your posts! That's a really nice feather to put in your tweed caps. You guys should pat yourself on the bat and then resolve to keep up the good work! Good job!

7:37 PM



Fran said...

Excellent article--love that bit about Jefferson, and this "But the most disturbing aspect of this whole thing is the larger cultural question. Are newspapers, in cutting books coverage, really just reflecting a society that cares less and less about books? Are we becoming a nation of people who prefer what I call "garbage" information -- inaccuracies or inanities or both -- over information that is factual, imaginative, truly enlightening?"

I think garbage information has unfortunately been winning out; I'm forever complaining about the nonsensical fallacious gibberish too often being dogmatically passed off as both "information" and writing today, especially as great writing. Though I don't think that's the only thing responsible for book-review section declines. Many things are likely responsible. And I think thermodynamic-type corrections are happening all over society as physical resources are depleted. Too many print-reviewers reviewing the same small number of books (which is often the case, in my opinion) is wasteful of both people energy and paper energy, both of which at the least cost someone somewhere money, and money is yet another resource becoming more scarce, at least in its value, at least in the amount of goods it can buy. If you want to survive in today's society especially, you've got to distinguish yourself more, you've got to create an individualized niche. The same applies for writers.

People are still reading and caring about books, in my opinion and experience, but they may be reading a bit less overall yet intentionally reading much more selectively when they do read: they've finally grown tired of reading and paying for the same-

*Philadelphia Inquirer*  
*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,*  
*Entertainment Weekly*  
*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,*  
*Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner*  
*Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC*  
*Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.*  
*King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie*  
*Moshin Hamid on Camus,*  
*Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay*  
*Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an*  
*Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of*  
*2006*

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are*  
*Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's*  
*Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's*  
*Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War*  
*Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating*  
*Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing*  
*Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha*  
*Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and*  
*Different Cultures and*  
*Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda*  
*Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*  
*Allegra Goodman on Keeping*

old content that's been published over and over and OVER  
again.

2:16 PM

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7/13/2007

## Another Disappointed San Diego Reader: Author Susan Vreeland



*This just in from San Diego-based author [Susan Vreeland](#), who is chagrined about the elimination of the stand-alone San Diego Union-Tribune's book section. After graduating from San Diego State University, Vreeland taught high school English in the San Diego City Schools for thirty years. She began writing features for newspapers and magazines in 1980, taking up subjects in art, travel, education, and skiing. She ventured into fiction in 1988 with "What Love Sees." Since then, she has become an international best selling novelist, with many accolades, including the San Diego Book Awards' Theodor Geisel Award and Best Novel of the Year, for "Life Studies" (2005), "The Passion of Artemisia" (2002), and "Girl" (1999). She also was nominated for the International Dublin Literary Award in 2001 for "Girl in Hyacinth Blue." Her letter has gone to three editors at the U-T:*

Dear Editor:

I am disappointed in and distressed by the new direction several newspapers have taken to eliminate the separate Books section and to squeeze it in on two interior pages of the Arts section, or to eliminate books coverage altogether. Decreased space is a disservice to the public who depend on the in-depth coverage of the evolving literary component to our society.

In particular, I will sorely miss the longer, thoughtful, penetrating examination of books written by reviewers of critical acumen carefully chosen specifically for each title. I have depended on this to guide my reading choices, as well as to point out a book's virtues and thereby make me a more insightful reader.

Countless others have benefited similarly. Some newspapers are substituting single paragraph comments, now called "Book Alerts,"

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By the Letter I](#)*

*[Wyatt Mason on Leonard Michaels  
Around the World on Wednesday](#)*

which are clearly unsatisfactory. It turns the Books section into something commercial rather than discerning and intellectual.

Another substitution is the writing of columns about what local subscribers are reading. While this may be of interest to some as a measure of curiosity, it has about it something of "the pack leading the pack." It is just one more step in the dumbing down of America because it will not encourage readers to engage in the less popular, less well known but perhaps more worthwhile reading that was encouraged by the former eight-page book section. As a substitute, it relinquishes its teaching role.

Likewise, website coverage is not an adequate solution. Many people read the newspaper and not the Internet; many have no Internet access. This shift is divisive of our society, and denies the previously judicious introduction of books to many. If the website will also turn into a report on what is being read rather than being a guide to what is worthy to be read and why, then it will do little to replace the enlightened coverage that the nation has benefited from in the past.

I urge you to reinstate the full, separate, perceptive Books section to what it was.

Susan Vreeland

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 10:08:00 AM



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7/17/2007

## Tuesday Roundup

NBCC finalist [Joyce Carol Oates](#) shifts from Steven Hall's "The Raw Shark Texts" to Tom McCarthy's "Remainder" to W.G. Sebald's "Austerlitz" to "The Vintage Book of Amnesia: An Anthology," edited by Jonathan Lethem, in her essay on amnesia and memory in The New York Review of Books.

NBCC board member Lev Grossman's "unedited, extended play" mini-essay on Harry Potter [here](#).

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NBCC finalist [William T. Vollmann's take](#) on Oliver August's "Inside the Red Mansion:" although the narrative is "less than dramatic," August is a "teller of truth."

Raleigh News & Observer public editor Ted Vaden [reviews its new book pages](#) (under part-time literary editor Marcy Smith) and acknowledges concerns from readers (and authors like Lee Smith) who want to maintain book review pages.

New issue of [Jacket Magazine](#) offers photos of Allen Ginsburg, and "Pieces on 'Pieces of Air in the Epic' by Brenda Hillman," edited by Barbara Claire Freeman, who notes, "The generic convention of the book review is monologic; however nuanced and subtle, the constraints of the form typically allow the inclusion of only one perspective. This collection of short texts on the poems in Brenda Hillman's Pieces of Air in the Epic intends first, to present a kind of collective 'book review,' that is, a form of writing about poems that demands a plurality of individual voices; and second, to provide a forum in which poets respond to and explore a particular poem." Contributors: Marjorie Welish, Graham Foust, Evie Shockley, C.D. Wright, Forrest Gander, Carol Snow, Robert Hass, Michael Davidson, Claudia Keelan, Robert Kaufman, Norma Cole, Marjorie Perloff, Geoffrey G. O'Brien, Juliana Spahr, Calvin Bedient, Reginald Shepherd, Cole Swensen, Elizabeth Robinson, Nathaniel Tarn, Bin Ramke, Donald Revell, Patricia Dienstfrey, Michael Palmer.

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NBCC president John Freeman asks, "Where is our Emile Zola?" in this [blogpost](#) on The Guardian.

NBCC member [Katherine A. Powers](#) on David Gelenter's "Americanism: The Fourth Great Religion" and "the green book: the everyday guide to saving the planet one simple step at a time," by Elizabeth Rogers and Thomas M. Kostigen

"Inner Workings," J.M. Coetzee's literary essays, assessed by [NBCC member James Marcus](#).

NBCC member Jeffrey Ann Goudie finds Annie Dillard's "[The Maytrees](#)" is "sublime when it's not annoying."

Now for some ick factor: NBCC member Jen A. Miller reviews Jerry Langton's "Rat: How the World's Most Notorious Rodent Clawed Its Way to the Top" [here](#).

Martha Woodruff from member station WMRA in Charlottesville reports on the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews on NPR today ("[Book Reviewers Decry Fewer Pages in Newspapers](#)"). How will readers learn about the books they want to read? Increasingly more likely online than in print.

Paris Review hosts a [reading](#) Wednesday evening at 6:30 in Central Park at the Hans Christian Anderson statue (on the west side of the Conservatory Water near Fifth Avenue and 74th Street), featuring Andre Aciman, Esther Allen, Mary Karr, and Monica Youn. Meanwhile, their summer issue features an interview with Norman Mailer (and glimpses into his scrapbook), a recently discovered poem by William Carlos Williams, published for the first time, and a translations of five Beaudelaire poems. (Shoutout to [Matt Weiland](#), who shifted from Granta to the Paris Review this month.)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Roundups](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:54:00 AM



#### 2 COMMENTS:

[Edward Champion](#) said...

In 1989, Tom Wolfe called for "a battalion, a brigade, of Zolas." As I recall, nobody took him up on his advice.

11:25 AM

[Spellchecker](#) said...

It's Allen Ginsberg, not "Ginsburg." C'mon NBCC!

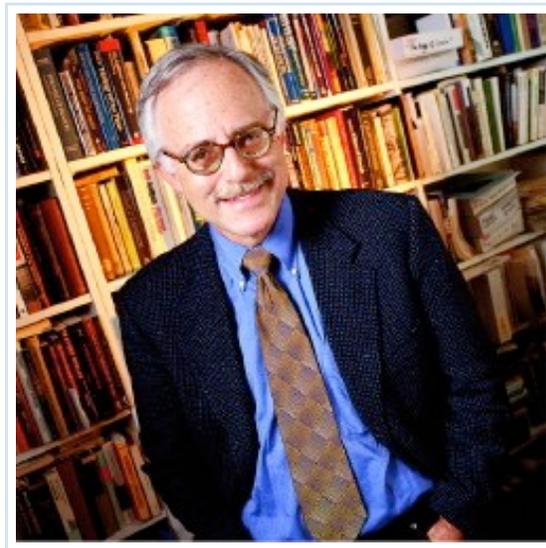
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7/23/2007

## Poisoning the Well



*To kick off BEA, the NBCC and Bookforum held a panel at the Paula Cooper Gallery in New York City about the intellectual history of the book review. The panelists included novelist, poet and critic Joyce Carol Oates, Bookforum editor-in-chief Eric Banks, Columbia University professor and author*

*James Shapiro, FSG publisher Jonathan Galassi, and NBCC member Lindsay Waters, executive editor of the humanities at the Harvard University Press. Lindsay recently sent us an extended form of his remarks. We're pleased to be able to present them here today.*

The newspaper owners are killing the book reviews. It's a fad among the owners, sweeping the nation. The review sections seem in danger of going in a short time. Will the disappearance of the book review sections be like the moment when we realized the elm trees were going? One day, as I remember it, we got the news a lot of them were dying in towns across the country, and the next moment the cities were sawing them all down and carrying the dead bodies away. "Bring out your dead!!"

The disappearance of criticism from the daily papers in the United States poses a problem that goes way beyond the problems that are most immediately apparent, such as few reviews means fewer ads for books and fewer sales of the sorts of books I publish at Harvard University Press or of the sort most publishers of serious fiction and non-fiction produce.

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*[Around the World on Thursday](#)*

Since Day One as an editor I have always thought about which book review editors can I or the publicists I work with reach personally to make an appeal for a book to be covered. I know a goodly number of newspaper people—maybe more than some editors—because I just feel I have to have personal ties. I want to know someone is going to be on the other end of the phone line when I call. So, it seems like a nightmare to think that those lines are being pulled out. If the papers shut down reviews, it'll be like having the door slammed in my face and the door removed.

In those glorious days of yesteryear just a little more than a century ago, when the future seemed to belong to the West, Walter Pater urged sensitive souls to always burn with a keen, gem-like flame, but what do we do now when the disappearance of the book reviews from so many papers portends the extinguishing of the critical flame? I would urge you to realize that the disappearance of criticism from our papers is not the cause, but the symptom of vast changes in our cultural ecology. It signals changes so long in gestation that they may be irreversible; and they are symptoms as indicative of momentous change as the discovery of hole in the ozone layer, the disappearance of the plankton from the sea, of the bees from fields, and the permafrost from Alaska. Oh, fine, the bosses might say, a literary person so besotted with books and their paraphernalia that he's crying out like Chicken Little that the sky is falling when all we've done is closed out a few unproductive accounts! Boo-hoo!! But I'm warning you: the problems are bigger than they seem and they're not solveable by getting a few newspaper execs to restore the book pages.

Beware, I say, lest the whole edifice of modern democratic society collapse if a stake is driven through its heart. That's what killing books and arts reviewing means. We must constantly be indulging ourselves in the freeplay of critical intelligence. Is the new De Lillo book good? What about Pynchon's *Against the Day*? Mary Gaitskill's *Veronica*? Is the new Arcade Fire really good? And what about the new Electrelane album, *No Shouts, No Calls*? We modern humans need to be able to read critics wrestling with their own feelings about such works of art. We don't want them to be invoking authorities who have sent down the word that a particular work is worthy. And we don't need authorities recognized as such by society telling us to tune out of works of art the way the self-styled "Dean of America" Stanley Fish does. You don't need to give a work of art the taste-test, he's written. All you need to know is whether it comes to you by a card-carrying writer; your reactions to the work are irrelevant.

What we get in newspaper book reviews are critics testifying to what their first encounters with a work were like, before any other people have experienced the work. There can be something awkward in such

*Morning*  
*Dog Days of Summer Reads: John Freeman*  
*Last Stop Greenwich Village*  
*Polyphonic Reviewing?*  
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*How We Choose Links for Roundup*  
*What's Graphic and What's a Novel and who's trying to ban them?*  
*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also Embargo Follies*  
*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing in Books*  
*The Rest of the Best: The Books That Didn't Make it Onto the NYTBR Best Book Survey*  
*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey*  
*To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive*  
*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?*

encounters that gives rise to some of the fun and sometimes frustrations of the readers of book reviews. It is like having a chance to watch someone struggling in the dark not having the faintest idea what sort of creature there might be with him or her in the room. "I feel these fleshy protuberances. Could this be the lithe proboscis of an elephant?" "Ooh, this is icky, sticky, yucky. What have I stepped into?" Awkward, yes; edifying, maybe; but this is one of the most important ways we humans manifest our freedom and model it to one another from one person to another and from one generation to another.

If we prohibit the critical encounter the way some in the academic world want to do, or if we declare it an expendable extra in the newspapers the way many owners of newspapers are doing, the loss to the citizenry of America will be permanent and lead to surprising results. The Law of Unintended Consequences is more basic to human life than the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Criticism is Tom Paine; it's Lester Bangs; it's Robert Christgau, Ed Park, Greil Marcus, Ellen Willis, Howard Hampton, Paul Goodman. It can be as silly as some of the lists of "top 10" movies or novels are; and it can be as serious as Manny Farber and Pauline Kael reviewing the movies. The core of it is always judgment, the judgment of the critic on the judgment of the artist that the work has been made and is ready to go out into the world. The reason — deep, subtle, easy to miss — that acts of critical judgment are acts that are central to human life is that they are activities that lead to the creation of new brain cells. Killing the book reviews is like poisoning the water system right at the city well.

The leaders of America have taken to strutting about in recent years with a certain thuggish manner. Television newscasters scream at their guest and threaten them physically by leaning over them and flexing not their minds, but their muscles. Americans used to be worried they'd come across as "ugly." No more. A certain authoritarian bullying has also entered the critical world both in terms of manner and substance. The bullying manner cuts across left and right, red state and blue state divisions. No one is content to play things out, and we all try to control the outcomes of events. We work as hard as we can to assure that determinism is the rule in life while claiming that freedom ought to be and maybe even is. We don't have freedom; we have just the opposite. We tell ourselves freedom is the rule when what really is the rule is conformism, and we get away with it because ideological disguise has been the fashion for years.

Nowhere has ideological disguise been the rule more in the critical world than in the fighting about the significance of the poetry of John Milton. Not a subject for the daily papers, you might say, but search your papers. The debate about Milton brought out big guns in the 1950s, in the 1960s, and even recently in the disputes about Stanley Fish's *How Milton Works*. That book got reviewed in all the major

*Writers Read Your Contracts*  
*Earth to Academia*  
*Medical Apartheid: Research*  
*Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*  
*Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon*  
*Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?*  
*This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad*  
*Review*

*Don't Know Much About*  
*Counterinsurgency*

## ***The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors***

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time*  
*Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,*  
*Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,*  
*Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,*  
*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review*  
*Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book*  
*Editor, Minneapolis Star*  
*Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,*  
*South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning*  
*News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver*  
*Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post*  
*Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,*  
*Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San*  
*Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing*  
*Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*

papers and none of the reviewers were lukewarm. Of course, what Milton did in his life and what his writings say matter to everyone in the newspaper business, because it was Milton who wrote what became the “declaration of independence” for newspapers on the very eve of the emergence of the newspapers as we know them, or as anyone in the West had ever known them, “Areopagitica.”

Milton is important because he rose up to fight authoritarianism of the kingship at the very same moment the culture of newspapers as we know it arose. The seventeenth century is when our world of newspapers and book reviews came into existence. From the beginning the review and the critique took on a role out of all proportion to the amount of space they took up and their location in the paper. The fact of criticism was important in and of itself. How could reviews — bickering, infighting, expressions of fine sentiment and feeling — how could this fetid swamp become the ground on which to build the skyscrapers of modern life? Newspapers were part of the political solution to a century and a half of fighting about religion that seemed impossible to end. But in 1688 peace was established. The day after the departure of James II was marked by the appearance of three newspapers. What had happened was that the people of England said they would stop talking about religion in public because they had noticed they had the bad habit of killing one another whenever they did so, but every other topic was fair game. After 1688 the world of papers and journals came alive, and what the thinker Jurgen Habermas calls the public sphere came into being. Daniel Defoe began *The Review* in 1704, Steele *The Tatler* in 1709, and Addison and Steele *The Spectator* in 1711. This is how and when criticism arose in papers in English.

No-holds barred criticism really began in Renaissance Italy with Lorenzo Valla. Valla’s *On the Donation of Constantine* used the newly developed philological method of textual criticism to destroy the authenticity of the most important document justifying the papacy’s claims to temporal rule over a large swathe of the Italian peninsula. Sir Frank Kermode would have no trouble imagining that his work is a continuation of the tradition of Valla. All reviewers of the arts in the daily papers should understand they too are part of a critical tradition that goes back to Valla. As Glen Bowersock writes in his new edition of the Valla what Valla does is he “rips apart the Latinity of the text of Constantine to prove, brilliantly and decisively, that Constantine could not have written it.”

Criticism begins in slow, close reading; it begins in textual criticism; and it is written in language often zingy, tasty, bitter, and totally deconstructive. Imagine the most notorious acts of deconstructive criticism, like the writings of Derrida and de Man, and you can have a sense of how critical writing was from the beginning loathed, feared, and frequently effective. The critical flame, once lit, spread through

*Philadelphia Inquirer*  
Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,  
*Entertainment Weekly*  
Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,  
*Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner*  
Lawrence Weschler

*A Conversation With NBCC*  
Winner Julie Phillips

*A Conversation With Barbara J.*  
King

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie*  
Moshin Hamid on Camus,  
Immigration, and Love

*An Interview With Melissa Fay*  
Green

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an*  
Activist

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of*  
2006

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are*  
Talking About in London

*Robley Wilson on What He's*  
Reading

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's*  
Reading

*T. Christian Miller On War*  
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating*  
Intestines in China

*William T. Vollmann on Doing*  
Drugs as Research

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha*  
Gellhorn

*Kiran Desai on Home and*  
Different Cultures and  
Developing Characters

*12 Questions for Chimamanda*  
Adichie

*5 Questions for Amy Hempel*  
Allegra Goodman on Keeping

Europe like in fits, starts, and sometimes like wildfire. After decades of practice, engaged practice done for political purposes to throw over the authorities, criticism got theorized by David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Immanuel Kant.

As David Hume showed, there can be no standard of taste, and because there cannot be, we readers must fight things out in the critical pages of journals and our papers. And it is in those pages that we dare express our deepest imaginings. What is happening when critics criticize artworks is an expansion of the human capacity to think. The world we live in literally gets larger every time an artist makes a new work and everytime the critic responds in writing to it in the pages of the papers. Every time? Yes, because without the blanks, there'd be no bull's eyes. So the world made by criticism is as grand and imposing as the LA Times building in downtown LA or the Tribune Tower on North Michigan Avenue.

Kant mapped out the whole picture: we respond to an artwork and simultaneously we want to tell others about it and argue with them about it. To cut off critique — which must take place not in our minds, but in the public space of reasons, in newspapers and journals — is to commit suicide. We need to be able to see critics wrestling with their own feelings about an artwork. And part of the sensational joy of it is seeing them respond with the time limits of the daily paper. It matters that the reviewer must respond to the work without knowing what others think about it yet and must state their judgment publicly. This is a blood sport. What is key is that the critic not invoke authority to justify their judgment but that they claim the authority to judge for themselves.

We need physical exercise? We need spiritual exercise even more. Engaging in critical judging of art works is “an exercise of responsible freedom,” as Pitt philosopher John McDowell puts it. If we don't exercise those muscles, they will atrophy. Key thing in criticism is the virgin encounter, me stumbling in the dark. Criticism and modern science grew up together in the 17th century, critics and scientists alike trying to discern order out of the chaos before their eyes.

Is this too much of a burden for the newspapers to bear? The owners are just business people. What responsibility do they have to the country they live in? Their job descriptions say only talk about their responsibility to the bottom line. If we want to give up free thinking, let's do so intentionally. Criticism of the arts has been the most conspicuous way in which we manifested our freedom, and the critics model freedom for us, show us how it's done, with panache, without fear. The writings of critics are the way we teach freedom from person to person, generation to generation. If we prohibit it in the academic world the way some leaders of the academic study of literature are

*Work Under Her Hat*  
*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's Working On*  
*Tom Bissell: What He's Working On and What He's Reading*  
*Jonathan Lethem: What He's Working On*  
*Ian McEwan on his Writing Process*  
*Don Delillo on Actors and Death*  
*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching Poetry*  
*Dave Eggers on Generosity*  
*Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory*  
*John Updike on Michiko Kakutani*  
*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike and "Blood Meridian"*  
*Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"*  
*Andrew Sean Greer on "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay"*  
*Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books*  
*John Irving on John Irving*  
*Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"*  
*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things They Carried"*

## ***Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina***

*Brad Benischek*  
*Jason Berry Part I*  
*Jason Berry Part II*  
*Susan Larson*  
*Jason Berry (Part I)*  
*Jason Berry (Part II)*  
*Brad Benischeck*  
*Thinking About New Orleans: An Update (6/04/07)*  
*James Lee Burke*  
*Ken Foster*  
*Louisiana in Words*  
*Joshua Clark*

doing, if we declare it an expendable financial luxury the way the newspaper owners are doing increasingly, the loss will be all ours and have a lasting effect unforeseen by the people of this generation.

Criticism is Lester Bangs. It's Frank Kermode, Elizabeth Bowen, Mary McCarthy, Thomas Merton, Virginia Woolf, George Eliot, Michael Dirda. It is Lorenzo Valla, and it oozes from crack in the pavement in the other HUP book I brought to show you today (beyond our brand-new Donation of Constantine—Howard Hampton's Born in Flames: Termite Dreams, Dialectical Fairy Tales, and Pop Apocalypses (HUP, 2007). It's lists, of course, it's lists. It's judgement upon judgement. It's gut reponses, and it's argument. When we engage in the process of arguing about art, we devise new reasons, new ideas, new forms of thought. This is a central human activity, one that leads to the creation of new brain cells. Killing the book reviews is—a phrase I've used elsewhere—Chernobyl for the Life of the Mind.

--Lindsay Waters

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 11:21:00 AM



### **2 COMMENTS:**

 grackyfrogg said...

eeek! that would be Virginia Woolf, last paragraph.

1:14 PM

 grackyfrogg said...

thanks for the fix.

3:15 PM

POST A COMMENT

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[Yesterday's link list included both a defense of l...](#)

[Look What the Cat Dragged In](#)

[Why Book Reviews Matter](#)

[Defending Culture vs. Defending Your Job](#)

[The triumph of Richard Serra § "I love you as...](#)

[REVIEWING THE REVIEWERS Pt. 2](#)

[Waters sets 'em straight](#)

[Jottings](#)

# CRITICAL MASS

*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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7/28/2007

## The Weekend Read: Jerome Weeks on a Book All Critics Should Own



*This week, long time NBCC member Jerome Weeks published a terrific essay on his blog, [Bookdaddy](#), about Gail Pool's "Faint Praise: The*

### WHAT IS THIS SITE?

*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the [NBCC Board of Directors](#) (see list of bloggers below).*

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*[Plight of Book Reviewing in America](#)." In Weeks' eyes, this is less a book about the current cutbacks in book reviewing, than a historical overview of the form and how it has lived within American arts and letters. Jerome has kindly allowed us to reprint the essay here, and it makes for essential reading -- especially for publishers and for anyone who wants to work as a critic today. -- JF*

In the future, freshly appointed book editors at our daily newspapers should be handed a copy of Gail Pool's *Faint Praise: The Plight of Book Reviewing in America*. They could use it: It is a very commonsensical, clear-headed and knowledgeable analysis of the current state of professional book reviewing.

Despite its sub-title, the slim book (170 pages) is not a response to the recent cutbacks in book pages, nor a quarrel with critics' judgments nor a gripe about how dumbed-down everything has become. In fact, Ms. Pool, a former *Boston Review* editor and book columnist for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, begins by citing a number of complaints that

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

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Another Opens](#)

have appeared over the decades, all finding the same faults with American reviewers and reviewing. Apparently, the newspaper book page was in a plight the moment it was born.

Instead, Faint Praise aims to explain how book reviewing actually works, the pressures on it and on individual reviewers, the long-term forces that keep reviewing low-paid, disrespected but still needed. Ms. Pool does indeed get around to such recent developments as those book page cutbacks (which have actually been going on for several years but which only generated concerted reactions the past year). She also addresses the rise of book blogs and the harmful effects of Amazon's amateur blurbs, notably the public's confusion of them with reviewing.

There have been reams of personal essays written about reviewing, plenty of journalists reflecting on their careers as book grumps and the occasional table-turning diatribe or "review of reviewers." Even so, on his blog, [Quick Study](#), Scott McLemee recalls that the Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism in 2001 included nothing on "practical criticism (as it was once called)." In his review, he asked why, and the response "was as if I'd asked for the return of slavery."

Snobbery is the cockroach of the academy; it'll never die. But journalists themselves have rarely treated the subject at serious length, either. Ms. Pool's ample bibliography of 229 items includes fewer than ten books that can be considered directly about the business. And quite a few of those were published before World War II.

Despite one's impressions, then, that reviewing has been thoroughly and self-importantly hashed over, Faint Praise -- as a book-length study -- is something of a rarity. The last complete volume I can recall reading about the practice (not the theory) of book reviewing was University of Georgia journalism dean John Drewry's Writing Book Reviews. There have been a couple of other books since, but the library copy of Drewry I accidentally came across was from 1966. The book went out of print 10 years later, yet it remains the first item to pop up on an Amazon search for "book reviews."

Still, academic snobbery is right in one regard: There is a distinction to be made between literary criticism and book reviewing.

Ever practical, Ms. Pool borrows Virginia Woolf's distinction: Book reviews concern newly issued books. Literary criticism holds to the long view; it has the luxury of time, and as a result, it does not suffer the pressure of commercial judgment, the desire of readers for straight-faced advice on what books are worth buying. Scholars and academic critics have certainly influenced tastes and thus sales (Malcolm Cowley on Faulkner, Lionel Trilling on Orwell). But a critical essay without an explicit judgment about a book or author need not be considered a

*Around the World on Wednesday*  
*Dog Days of Summer Reading:*  
*Leora Skolkin-Smith*  
*Poisoning the Well*  
*Saturday Roundup*  
*Potter: More Henry V than Prince*  
*Hal*  
*Around the World on Thursday*  
*Morning*  
*Dog Days of Summer Reads: John*  
*Freeman*

## **Past Posts Of Note**

*Reviewing 101: John Updike's*  
*Rules, which he admits*  
*breaking.*  
*Speaking of Updike: The safety of*  
*criticism and his writing*  
*routine, and feeling glum about*  
*the future*  
*The NBCC's Tips For Successful*  
*Book Reviewing*  
*George Orwell on Book Reviews*  
*Why Book Reviews Matter*  
*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30*  
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*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing*  
*in Books*  
*The Rest of the Best: The Books*  
*That Didn't Make it Onto the*  
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*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'*  
*Best Book Survey*  
*To see Who Voted for What and*  
*Why in the NYTBR Best Book*  
*Survey, scroll through the June*  
*'06 Archive*  
*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain*  
*Books?*

failure, whereas a book review would. Judgment is our business (although we peddle other product lines, too -- Literary Analysis, Deep Wisdom, Cheap Laffs). However much reviewers may feel we are not a part of the publishing industry's marketing, however much we must remove ourselves from such concerns when considering a book's value, we are a factor in sales. To our great credit, an unpredictable, unreliable factor.

Ms. Pool spends some time pointing all this out, pointing out how it's impossible to keep the author "out of the room" while the reviewer is working -- as well as the publisher and all of his marketing tools. Reviewers cannot pretend to ignore that the author of a new novel is Philip Roth, for instance. Or that this other book is clearly aimed at an audience for lurid personal memoirs and not primary-sourced histories. Nothing gets reviewed in a vacuum.

This may seem an obvious point, but it's a point worth making because it's not often heard. It's one of several misconceptions about reviewing that Ms. Pool kicks down: that anyone can do it, for example, or that "objectivity" is always desirable or even expressly sought by periodicals or readers. The "match" between reviewer and book, she believes, is the most important choice an editor makes. If that editor were to winnow out any reviewer who has argued against a book's thesis as well as any reviewer who has championed it, he may be left with no knowledgeable critics at all. Yet aren't reviewers hired, Ms. Pool asks, because they have passionate opinions?

It's in the American tradition to seek "objectivity" in reviewers (meaning "no obvious conflicts of interest") and not in the British tradition, where a smaller pool of writers contributing to far more review outlets encourages political sniping, rousing crossfires and unabashed promotion of one's chums and allies. Witness Christopher Hitchens' merrily unrepentant declaration on a recent NBCC-sponsored BookExpo panel about criticism that he was the best person to write an Atlantic Monthly review of his friend Ian McEwan's new novel, *On Chesil Beach* and he didn't care who thought otherwise.

The American tradition of objectivity is partly due to the principle of "journalistic balance" developed by The New York Times and other papers, which became the press' calling card to white-collar respectability and professionalism after World War II. In other words, as Ms. Pool notes, it's a journalistic principle, not a literary one. It's also a principle, she doesn't note, that has been buttressed by the post-war tendency toward monopolies in city newspapers. When you're the Big Voice in town, there are pressures from all sides to remain "balanced," although in practice this generally means not accuracy so much as a safe status quo. This monopoly set-up is one reason that I -- and many other readers -- don't mind reviews such as Mr. Hitchens' (and even

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*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver*  
*Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post*  
*Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,*  
*Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San*  
*Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing*  
*Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*

eagerly seek them out) in a periodical like the Atlantic, while in a town's Only Daily, we'd find the same review and Mr. Hitchens' personal ties to his subject a somewhat more irksome issue.

Significantly, "objectivity" in reviews is also an American legal decision that was never laid out in Britain. The James Fenimore Cooper libel cases were a little-known quarrel (Ms. Pool's is the only extensive discussion of them that I've seen -- bravo to her for digging it up) that had the author of *The Last of the Mohicans* seeking redress against reviews that had stepped beyond literary comment into personal attacks on a property issue. He won, and "fair comment" became an American principle: "The privilege of criticism cannot warrantably be perverted to the purpose of willfully and falsely assailing the moral character of the author."

Fine and noble. But in the end, American editors and reviewers still supposedly seek objectivity -- a kind of above-the-fray neutrality that can suck the life out of a review -- when what we need, Ms. Pool writes, is "fairness": disagreeing with a book but giving the author his due, acknowledging our own biases, not being blinded by them.

Yet it's the blandly positive that prevails. Although Ms. Pool doesn't explicitly mention Heidi Julavits' famous, misguided attack on "snarky" writing, she does make a convincing case that mushy praise is a much more common failing among American reviews, and those journals, like Ms. Julavits' *Believer* that espouse "positive" reviews out of highmindedness (or squeamishness) are not really doing anyone any favors -- except booksellers and publishers. By default, many newspaper book pages take precisely the same stand -- "no unhappy news" -- for less noble reasons but to much the same cheerleading and book-peddling effect. The editors fear readers won't read many hit jobs. They worry their own bosses will ask, why waste space on worthless books? So then ... why do we report losing baseball games? Why cover failed candidacies?

Magazine reviews aren't much better: I've been told by glossy magazine editors that their business is to provide readers with choices of what to buy. And as for the disappearance of book reviews from men's magazines, I was jokingly informed that they've declined because "knowing about books won't get you laid." Women remain the prime market for most kinds of books, but long gone is Hugh Hefner's air of supposed sophistication, his fantasy of the bachelor "putting a little mood music on the phonograph and inviting in a female acquaintance for a quiet discussion" about Nietzsche. Considering many young males today -- and their magazines -- this looks like some golden-age ideal of literary discourse.

The prevalence of happy reviews holds true even on the Web, regardless

*Enquire Within Upon Everything*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,*

*Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,*

*Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner*

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*12 Questions for Chimamanda*

*Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Hempel*

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping*

of its reputation for being more honest, more personal, more brutal. If one discounts any site powered by political animosities or calculations, it should be plain that the great mass of blogs out there are motivated by the fan's eager dedication, while many substantial Websites are mostly promo vehicles. Google a favorite author's name and see what you get: The slashing attacks will likely number in the low single digits.

A critic can make a stir, can make himself the center of attention with a savage pen. But it's hard to sustain, hard to make a living at it. Americans, Ms. Pool makes clear, really do not abide much negative thinking. Dale Peck has already said he's quit writing his infamous "hatchet jobs," although they were Hallmark Valentines compared to what made Edgar Allan Poe the best known literary critic of his age. He warmed up by calling Longfellow a plagiarist and got ugly and personal from there. But Poe never could get the funding for his own literary journal off the ground -- and his was America's first great age of literary journals. Most publishers, especially in the tight-knit, commercially incestuous world of New York periodicals, will not pay writers to piss off influential people (Ms. Pool provides examples of the eager and unethical backscratching among our writer-reviewers -- what *Spy* magazine used to label "Logrolling in Our Time").

In all of this, *Faint Praise*, which is published by University of Missouri Press, is not a feat of style or wit or vehement anger. Ms. Pool is not going to make us forget the pithy, cutting observations that such writers as Poe or Cyril Connolly have made about the field. But her book is thoughtful and timely and sensible -- so sensible that I feel I can raise two serious weaknesses in Ms. Pool's arguments without unduly damaging the book's value.

First, Ms. Pool believes that publishers are at considerable fault (although hardly solely at fault) for the current straits many newspaper book pages and literary journals are in because of the industry's unwillingness to provide advertising support. The industry gives lip service to the crying need for a more widespread and lively literary discussion, a bigger presence in American culture, but doesn't really pony up the advertising that might help bring this about.

This presupposes, however, that publishers have the money to do this, when, in fact, publishing has notoriously low profit margins. Which is why the corporate pressure of recent years to get and keep those margins well above 10 percent has twisted many houses into frantic bestseller factories. It also assumes that, at some time, publishers did provide such money. But as I've argued before -- regarding Howard Kurtz and Jay Trachtenberg's mistaken takes on the declining book page -- newspaper book reviews have never made money. Not within living memory at any rate. I cannot recall a single significant ad from a major publisher in *The Dallas Morning News'* book pages in the past

*Work Under Her Hat*  
*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's Working On*  
*Tom Bissell: What He's Working On and What He's Reading*  
*Jonathan Lethem: What He's Working On*  
*Ian McEwan on his Writing Process*  
*Don DeLillo on Actors and Death*  
*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching Poetry*  
*Dave Eggers on Generosity*  
*Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory*  
*John Updike on Michiko Kakutani*  
*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike and "Blood Meridian"*  
*Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"*  
*Andrew Sean Greer on "The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay"*  
*Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books*  
*John Irving on John Irving*  
*Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"*  
*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things They Carried"*

## ***Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina***

*Brad Benischek*  
*Jason Berry Part I*  
*Jason Berry Part II*  
*Susan Larson*  
*Jason Berry (Part I)*  
*Jason Berry (Part II)*  
*Brad Benischek*  
*Thinking About New Orleans: An Update (6/04/07)*  
*James Lee Burke*  
*Ken Foster*  
*Louisiana in Words*  
*Joshua Clark*  
*Julie Smith*

decade. So the cutbacks in book pages have to do with a much wider loss of ad revenue for newspapers than the pittance that publishers traditionally have provided. One would certainly like publishers to provide more advertising, but the current sorry state of book pages is the result of newspaper owners choosing to let their more literate readers suffer by chucking book reviews overboard. Or they feel the literate ones have long since abandoned ship, anyway.

The second failing of *Faint Praise* is Ms. Pool's inability to suggest any significant remedies. She does argue for an explicit ethics policy to be drawn up by book editors for their reviewers. A good point. I've never seen one in all my years reviewing. Again, the ethics involved may be obvious ("do not praise too highly your spouse's bad lyric poetry"). Or one may even disagree with them. But at least the ground would be clear.

Ms. Pool also argues that the National Book Critics Circle should be doing more, that it's wrapped up in giving out awards and little else. Ms. Pool is an NBCC member, as am I, and her argument had some weight until relatively recently, when the NBCC board stirred itself and established its very useful and welcome blog, *Critical Mass*, and has embarked on a public campaign to fight book page cutbacks.

The campaign may be a futile, rearguard action, as some have argued (often those who believe the Web is the only future). As much as anything, it's more about simply saving jobs or freelance gigs than raising standards (although we can make the case that those jobs and gigs mean something to the community of readers). But the point still stands: What is to be done? What else could Ms. Pool (or anyone) recommend that NBCC should do to improve book reviewing? The NBCC is volunteer-run (it took the organization years just to get its 501 (3c) non-profit status, something my daughter's therapist managed in a week), and its membership is primarily freelancers -- not a group inclined to coherent, effective, collective action.

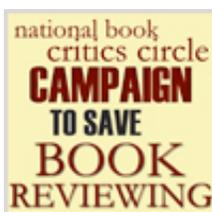
A dreadful theater critic I knew once campaigned for the American Theater Critics Association to institute a set of professional standards and, in effect, a licensing authority. One could call oneself a theater critic (and presumably be hired as a critic by newspapers and magazines) only after being tested and approved by a board -- and being issued a magnetic ID card for access to ATCA's secret Area 51 headquarters. Or some such thing. The fact that the critic in question, to support his case, approvingly cited the old membership practices of the Soviet Writers Union shows just how far from this earthly dimension the entire proposal was. Gulag, anyone? As one fellow critic noted at the time, even if we wanted to create such a Stalinist system in the Land of Free Speech, the only reason jaded newspaper editors would give it a moment's thought is if it could be proved that a) it

Andrei Codrescu

Blake Bailey

Tom Piazza

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actually improved theater reviewing and, more importantly, that b) the improved theater reviewing increased newspaper sales. Barring this, ATCA (or NBCC) could issue all the edicts and membership exams and decoder rings it wants, but they'll do little to change the reviewing culture at our newspapers.

I do not mean to espouse resignation and futility here. The fact that some journalism departments have started to offer criticism classes is an encouraging sign, although Ms. Pool holds to the admittedly circular stance that such classes won't be effective until standards in the field are better. She thinks the classes will just pass along the established bad habits because that's what the teachers have learned, those are the models out there. I don't buy this entirely, although my faith in academia as the Great Rectifier of Social Evils is feeble. Teachers are often motivated by idealism, though, the desire to improve what's out there, not merely mimic it.

It's also encouraging because of the baseline anti-intellectualism of American newspapers. Journalists haven't devoted book-length studies to reviewing because, like so much in the press, it's viewed more as a craft, as something aimed at Any Straphanger with a 5th Grade Education, than something needing or deserving intellectual consideration. It's still the case at many newspapers that pop music critics and video game critics, for example, are chosen among the youngest, most inexperienced staff members because, presumably, they're more "in touch with the young 'uns." And besides, that's all the subjects are worth. It'll keep the kids away from the important, influential, thoughtful, Pulitzer-winning stuff.

Like writing editorial columns getting the Iraq War wrong.

Actually, I often find our newspapers' Front Page anti-intellectualism profoundly healthy, especially in its disrespect for authority. But as Ms. Pool indicates, in such an environment, it's hard, even paradoxical, to pursue any sort of intellectual endeavor (that is, anything requiring more than gut instinct or a five-star rating system). A real review, after all -- not a blurb, not an Entertainment Weekly paragraph with a B plus-- is a demonstration of, an argument for, the reviewer's authority.

In any event, the newspaper book page is worth fighting for, worth arguing about like this, because the Big City Daily remains the only American medium dedicated to providing a decent level of professional book criticism from a number of sources addressing a general but local audience -- and all for a pretty cheap price. Commercial TV and radio do nothing like book criticism, even public television and radio are pretty slack on the job. Cable TV -- what conservatives believe has already removed any need for public TV -- is mostly a joke. Magazines are too small in circulation, too narrowcast yet too scattered. Book

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blogs are a fascinating new medium but they are certainly preaching to the converted. As cumbersome and faulty and cozily middle-brow as the newspaper book page is, it remains one of the best efforts (one of the only efforts) to engage a city's readers in a common discussion about books and book issues, to lead them beyond personal interests to something new or different in literature. The book page can also advocate for literacy and libraries and education -- all the things that newspaper managements, if they had any brains, would see are vital to their own continuance.

Because Faint Praise depends on well-laid-out arguments more than zippy one-liners, I've taken the liberty of concluding by featuring lengthier-than-normal passages from the book. So Ms. Pool gets the last word, and I risk copyright infringement:

**Reviewing isn't for everybody:** "It is one of the curious aspects of this field that though people deplore the poor quality of reviewing, no one seems to conclude that so many reviews are bad because reviewing is hard to do well. On the contrary, the faults are ascribed to the individual reviewers, and the attitude prevails at all levels of the literary world that reviewing is easy, something anyone can do."

**Writing novels or even non-fiction books doesn't make an author a good critic** (please inform The New York Times): "[Because the hiring process for reviewers] emphasizes writing as if it were a monolithic skill, editors often end up with reviewers who write well but may not be good critics, and authors whose skills may be entirely inappropriate... Fiction writers don't necessarily have a good analytical sense of why a piece of literature succeeds or fails, which is the most useful aspect of the review for the reader.... In hiring authors because they are authors, review editors are turning to writers whose main interest isn't likely to be reviewing; most fiction writers, poets and biographers are primarily interested in writing fiction, poetry and biography, not devoting the best of their energy and attention to criticism. Still worse, editors run the risk of hiring writers whose motive for reviewing is not to evaluate the books at hand but to promote their own names and their latest works."

**Critics need to work on criticism:** "Nothing seems to me more revealing about our cultural attitudes toward book reviewing than this question of 'having work of one's own,' [i.e., the critic writing his own books] which seems peculiarly related to the genre of critical journalism. We don't expect the financial journalist to be a banker or the political reporter to be a politician."

**The pressures endemic to newspaper reviews:** "In an underfunded and underappreciated department, review editors lack clout. They haven't the power to raise reviewer fees, however much they

might like to do so. Reviews are assigned little space, or they're given inappropriate space .... Unlike news, which is essential, book reviews are under pressure to earn their keep: [newspaper] publishers have sought advertising support, which has commercialized the book page. Confronting hard times in recent years, newspapers cut book pages ... These pressures can lead review editors to seek favorable reviews that will justify the use of space to their own editors, newspapermen who aren't necessarily bookish types and may believe that selecting a book only to find fault with it is to waste valuable column inches.

Equally important, newspapers' focus on news has led American papers in various ways to treat books as news, striving for such qualities as objectivity, newsworthiness and timeliness, which are news values and are not always appropriate, beneficial or even possible in a literary context."

**But the Web isn't a paradise for reviewing, either:** "Underpaid in print, reviewers and even editors are often unpaid on the Web; a volunteer corps, they can devote even less time and fewer resources to quality, and they have fewer incentives to do so.... Because it's accessible and affordable, the Web does allow for the truly independent reviewer; the individual who sets up a personal Web site for his reviews is, in a literal sense, self-employed and can say precisely what he wants, though whether we can call it 'employment' is dubious [she means "doubtful"]... But apart from their own pages, reviewers are writing for particular Web sites and, as with magazines, the editorial aims of an individual site determine the nature of its reviews. ... Reviewers writing for the many genre sites assume and write for an audience of fans, who may be more enthusiastic than discriminating."

**Nonetheless, book reviews are important** -- and not necessarily for book sales: "Although it may seem old-fashioned to say it, and though I'm hardly a disinterested observer, I believe book reviews matter. They matter not only to authors, publishers and critics, those of us in the field whose livelihood and egos are involved; they matter not only to the readers who are trying to use them to guide their reading; they also matter to readers who don't read reviews. They influence reading. Even today, when reviews have been diminishing in number and alternative kinds of book coverage have emerged, hundreds of reviews appear weekly in newspapers, in magazines and on the Web; our most prestigious publications continue to set our literary agenda.... Their commentary influences not only literary standards but also cultural attitudes, helping to shape what we think about many issues and whether we think about certain issues at all."

--[Jerome Weeks](#)

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)



### 3 COMMENTS:

 [book/daddy](#) said...

I hasten to correct a boneheaded mistake in my essay.

When Scott McLemee mentioned "practical criticism (as it once was called)," he was actually referring to I. A. Richards' classic book about close reading of texts, "Practical Criticism" -- and NOT book reviewing in general.

The book was a staple of my college years, and I completely forgot it.

Still, it doesn't alter the larger argument made in those paragraphs: that academics often discount book reviewing (and often because it consorts with commercialism and popular tastes), that regardless of such attitudes, there is a valid distinction to be made between lit crit and book reviewing in the mass media.

10:39 AM

 [Jane Ciabattari](#) said...

Hey Jerome, Thanks so much for this. Appreciate your thoroughness re: Gail Pool's book, in particular the discussion of the whys of the differences between American and British book reviewing approaches. Many American newspapers I review for spell out ethical no-nos.

And yes, also appreciate your mention of current NBCC efforts on behalf of book criticism and book culture. Since April the NBCC has been actively working toward raising the question of the future of book reviewing, through posts on the Critical Mass blog, by encouraging editorials, op eds and blog posts from authors, editors, readers, through a petition and read-in in Atlanta, in panels virtually every month, on the radio, even on the Colbert Show (thanks again to Salman Rushdie for that one). The current focus is on the endangered newspaper book pages, but NBCC concerns are for book criticism in all forms, all technologies. Recent posts also have dealt with the disappearance of quarterlies, often the only publications that review small-press publications, from library shelves, in favor of databases.

2:18 PM

 [PD Smith](#) said...

Thanks for posting this - a fascinating piece. As a British writer, I was also particularly interested in the US-UK differences in reviewing.

But, depressingly, "the baseline anti-intellectualism" of your newspapers is not just an American problem...

4:22 AM

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*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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7/30/2007

## The View from Mobile: Is this the End of Print?



We are living in the midst of a revolution. I became aware of this most profoundly a number of years ago when I paid

### WHAT IS THIS SITE?

*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the [NBCC Board of Directors](#) (see list of bloggers below).*

### WHAT IS THE NBCC?

*The non-profit organization of book critics responsible for the yearly [National Book Critics Circle Awards](#).*

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*Eric Banks*

*Jane Ciabattari*

*Rigoberto Gonzalez*

*Mary Ann Gwinn*

*James Marcus*

*Maureen McLane*

a visit to the small college library in my old hometown. While roaming the stacks, breathing in the smell of antique leather bindings and aging paper, it suddenly struck me that there was no one else around me. Mildly alarmed that the library had closed without my knowing it, I stepped out into the broad center aisle and checked the wall clock. It was then that I noticed another room at the far end of the floor, glassed-in and eerily lit by multiple computer screens. Literally dozens of students were there, hunched over keyboards tapping away or tipped back in their chairs staring into space. The contrast couldn't have been more stark. Before me was the future, behind me the past - unnoticed and presumably unmourned by the rising generation of scholars.

Like most bookish people I have accepted the fact that books, newspapers, and magazines will claim a smaller share of the pie amid changing technologies and habits of the reading public. But over the last year the trends have accelerated at such an astounding rate that there would seem to be little doubt that the world of print - so much a part of our intellectual universe since the 15th century - will be gone sooner than later.

As the members of the NBCC know too well, newsrooms around the country have been cutting talented staff and dumbing down content in

[Scott McLemee](#)

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mostly vain attempts to arrest free-falling circulation and advertising. Publishers and owners seem helpless amid these new realities, and their efforts tragically recall nothing so much as the panicked struggles of a drowning man.

Even Arthur Sulzberger, owner of The New York Times, America's journalistic gold standard, confessed to Haaretz that he couldn't guess whether his paper would still be publishing a print edition in five years. "I really don't know," he said. And astonishingly, he added that he doesn't care, since the "Internet is a wonderful place to be and we're leading there."

The death of print is so inevitable, according to the worst-case-scenario crowd, that not even the multibillion dollar phenomenon of Harry Potter can arrest it. Many of the millions of children (and adults) who have adored every page never cracked a book before, and recent studies show that most of these aren't likely to crack any other book afterwards either. The precipitous decline in young people reading anything - books, poetry, newspapers, magazines, plays - continues by the day. One recent report predicted the death of literary reading within 50 years.

For those of us who labor on Grub Street, this is particularly distressing. We know that good writing matters, that literature can change the world. It's hard to imagine a truly free society without a vigorous exchange of ideas in books, periodicals, and newspapers. Granted, the Internet is rich and full, but people do not go there for extended reading. They want bits and bytes, all easily digested.

Whether or not e-books, the Internet, podcasts and who knows what else can adequately fill the gap, only time will tell. In the meantime, old fogey that I am (my 16-year-old daughter calls me "yesterday's man"), I'll rage against the machine and continue to celebrate the printed page to any and all who still have the will to read it.

--John Sledge, Books editor, Mobile (AL) Press-Register

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 1:06:00 AM



#### 3 COMMENTS:

Daniel said...

Books aren't going anywhere. Most of those internet scholars are printing out the pages they're viewing. The experience of sitting down with a book is almost meditative, it helps you think

*Reviewing Books: One Door Shuts,  
Another Opens*

*Around the World on Wednesday*

*Dog Days of Summer Reading:*

*Leora Skolkin-Smith*

*Poisoning the Well*

*Saturday Roundup*

*Potter: More Henry V than Prince  
Hal*

*Around the World on Thursday  
Morning*

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*Reviewing 101: John Updike's  
Rules, which he admits  
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of  
criticism and his writing  
routine, and feeling glum about  
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful  
Book Reviewing*

*George Orwell on Book Reviews*

*Why Book Reviews Matter*

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30  
Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for  
Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a  
Novel and who's trying to ban  
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also  
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing  
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*The Rest of the Best: The Books  
That Didn't Make it Onto the  
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'  
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and  
Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain  
Books?*

through a concept more thoroughly, clearly—and I am a computer-generation person. It shouldn't be about future / past, the internet and books are not opposed. The relationship will continue to be a dynamic one as long as the two media can contribute in their own ways.

2:33 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

I agree, Daniel. I read many things online, and books and short fiction and magazine articles on the page, and some things come over cellphone and others on my PC. The range of forms suits my mobile lifestyle. I don't want any of them to go away.

3:25 PM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

oops I meant cellphone.

3:27 PM

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***The Critical I:  
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*Magazine*  
*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,*  
*Publishers Weekly*  
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*Investigative Reporter*  
*Karen Long, Book Editor,*  
*Cleveland Plain Dealer*  
*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review*  
*Founder*  
*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book*  
*Editor, Minneapolis Star*  
*Tribune*  
*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,*  
*South Florida Sun Sentinel*  
*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning*  
*News Staff Critic*  
*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver*  
*Post*  
*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post*  
*Book Notes Columnist*  
*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,*  
*Houston Chronicle*  
*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San*  
*Francisco Chronicle*  
*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing*  
*Editor, Publishers Weekly*  
*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*

*Philadelphia Inquirer*  
*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,*  
*Entertainment Weekly*  
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*King*

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*Moshin Hamid on Camus,*  
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*Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an*  
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*Dick Adler on the Best Books of*  
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*Richard Powers*

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*Robley Wilson on What He's*  
*Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's*  
*Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War*  
*Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating*  
*Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing*  
*Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha*  
*Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and*  
*Different Cultures and*  
*Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda*  
*Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*  
*Allegra Goodman on Keeping*

*Work Under Her Hat*  
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***Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina***

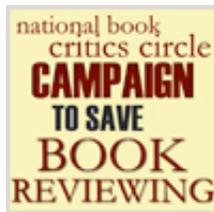
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*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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7/31/2007

## As the Book World Turns

Following, some of the latest twists and turns in the world of book culture and book reviewing.

The softening affecting most of the newspaper world continues, which means management is looking for whatever they can jettison. (Even newspaper real estate ads are shifting from print to online: The Internet will have 60 percent of real estate ads by 2011, reports Bloomberg News.)

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*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the NBCC Board of Directors (see list of bloggers below).*

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Last week the business section of the New York Times ran two stark stories side by side, reporting that 1) the Times company newspapers had suffered advertising drops quarter-to-quarter of anywhere from close to six percent to roughly eleven percent, depending on the paper, and 2) the Tribune company had a 59 percent drop in quarterly earnings, much of that attributable to decreased advertising in its newspapers (which include the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, Newsday and others).

Earlier this month, the Audit Bureau of Circulation, the main newspaper auditing group, will begin to include online readership as well as print readership in calculating circulation figures, which should give newspapers a boost. Another possible boost: Google commented on its efforts to help newspapers regain advertising revenue: "We believe newspapers are a critical component in the marketing ecosystem," Spencer Spinnell, Google Print Ads head of sales strategy told the New York Times. "More than 50 percent of adults read newspapers every day, and marketers are always trying to reach new customers. It's always a great multiplier effect when marketers think holistically both offline and online."

In this week's [Fortune](#), [Marc Gunther](#) sets the scenario for the Washington Post: Go digital or die, then softens the blow: "The Washington Post, a first-class newspaper that dominates its local market, has the best shot of any at reinventing journalism for the

[Scott McLemee](#)

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Internet." Gunther calls for bold strokes: "Could newspapers join to pressure Google, Yahoo and other aggregators to pay them for their content? Could they combine their Web sites? [Warren] Buffett muses out loud: "The ideal combination would be if The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and the Post had a joint Web site, and you couldn't get any one individually. That, you could sell for a fair amount of money, and it would have one hell of a readership."

Meanwhile, hyperlocal strategy has hit the big screen as well as book coverage, with newspapers in Tampa, Atlanta, Fort Lauderdale, and Denver following Dallas's lead and sending their on-staff film critics packing. Some of them have reappeared online, almost overnight. A missed opportunity? asks Jennifer Dorroh in the August/September issue of the [American Journalism Review](#). "Thanks to advertising, supplying news feeds to other Web sites, subscriptions and special projects, "ArtsJournal is fairly profitable, so I can afford to expand it," says Douglas McLennan, founding editor of [ArtsJournal.com](#), a Seattle-based digest of arts journalism. "The laughable thing is this ought to have been the terrain of traditional media companies. They totally mismanaged and squandered these opportunities online. But I don't believe the sky is falling," says McLennan, who is acting director of the National Arts Journalism Program, a newly revived organization of arts journalists. "I feel like we're standing on the verge of a golden age of criticism. At times of the greatest change in a culture, that's when critics have their biggest role to play."

Chauncey Mabe, NBCC member and book editor of the Sun Sentinel, has joined the gang of blogging book editors (see his [Off the Page](#)). He joins the Los Angeles Times's literary blog [Jacket Copy](#), the New York Times's [Paper Cuts](#), the Chicago Tribune's [TribBooks](#), the Dallas Morning News's [Texas Pages](#). Who else is out there?

NBCC member [Sven Birkerts](#) in "Lost in the Blogosphere," explains why he believes literary blogging won't save literary culture, in the Boston Globe.

Could this be the tipping point? The executive editor of one major daily says, "Tell those book publishers that if they took out just three or four ads in our paper, hell, I'll give 'Books' its own stand-alone section." Listen up, publishers.

Simon & Schuster revenue up 14 percent, to \$200.3 million, in the second quarter, reports [PW Daily](#). First half profits up 20 percent, to \$429.6 million.

And, on a lighter note, take a look at this [post](#) on luring teens to read from former NBCC board member David Kipen, who now heads the National Endowment for the Arts's literary program and the Big Read.

*The Weekend Read: Jerome Weeks  
on a Book All Criti...*

*Saturday Roundup*

*In Other News*

*Reviewing Books: One Door Shuts,  
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*Around the World on Wednesday*

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*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'  
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and  
Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain  
Books?*

PS As her last Harry Potter book, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," sold 8.3 million copies during its first 24 hours on sale in the U.S., for approximately \$250 million in sales, assume J.K. Rowling had a happy birthday today.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Roundups](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 4:51:00 PM



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8/01/2007

## Survival of Small Press Journals: A Librarian Says the Future Is Digital, but We're Not There Yet



The future is digital, and that's partly my fault. I've spent my library career as a technophile, and I'll continue to play that role. But it's one thing to promote access to electronic information as a common good and quite another to insist that a discipline's needs are well-met by replacing a well-known, beloved form with an incomplete, disembodied, fletcherized stream of "information."

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Earlier on Critical Mass, Kevin Prufer posted his experience about discovering that the University of Central Missouri library had dropped most of its small print literary journals. I'm pleased to say that due to his "spluttering," as he put it, his library reconsidered their actions. But I'll add my own splutter to the discussion.

As a librarian, reader, and writer, I understand why Prufer was unhappy when he asked where the literary journals were and he was told "they're all available in a database." No, actually, they aren't.

It's my role as a librarian to listen to readers: they are not broken, and what they believe matters. This is, after all, a service profession. The reader who insists that a database stream does not replace his beloved [Virginia Quarterly Review](#) is not wrong, and is in fact telling us something very important.

Prufer is correct; it's a serious mistake to drop the print versions of the small literary journals that have no true online counterpart--a mistake made at a miniscule savings overall, given the typical budget of an academic library large enough to be carrying these titles in the first place (yes, even after factoring in shelf space, binding, and management). The \*form\* of these journals is a large part of what these journals are, and it's our job as librarians to ensure this form is available to our readers.

However useful our databases--and having earned my library degree on

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

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the cusp of the digital era, I would never go back to the laborious, dusty era when massive print indexes ruled the earth--for literary journals, these huge pots of digital content are best used as they were originally intended: as useful post-publication adjuncts to the real McCoy.

The writing instructors and MFA candidates seeking to spend a happy hour or two with the latest [Pleiades](#) or [American Scholar](#) do not have their scholarly needs met by a database (even those databases that provide coarse approximations of a journal issue by listing its key articles in publication order) any more than replacing the statue on the university commons with a microfiche reader stocked with fiche displaying what the statue looked like (before we took it down as an "efficiency measure") truly replaces what was standing there before.

A literary journal, as a form, is a very specific event in time and space. I see the letter carrier arrive: "Finally," I think, "The *Journal of Irreplaceable Essays* is here." I bring it in the house. I open it up, flip it back and forth, then plan what I'm going to read first and where I'm going to read it. The best parts become my incentive for my time on the treadmill. The rest becomes what I read when I'm cooking dinner, or lying on the couch ignoring television, or sitting in a car waiting for someone. I pore over the letters, note the ads, admire the artwork, ponder the cover; I am flowing in the river of this journal, part of the journey.

As I read, I note the font, the placement of words on the page, the order of articles in the journal, the feel of it in my hand: all this is "information," and non-trivial information at that. Some of this information we may end up losing in the eventual transition to digital forms, but it needs to be understood as a loss, and we need to know what we must retain.

I don't believe there is any plot to kill the small print literary journal, but I polled my librarian colleagues on several discussion lists and heard, at best, a massive collective shrug, with a couple of notable exceptions. (One exception observed, "The readers are the people who need to have a voice in how their publications work--what makes them useful and what would make them better.")

Librarians--pushed to the wall financially, trying to maintain the right statistics for the bean-counters, unfamiliar with this small subgenre within their collections--have subscribed to a policy of benign neglect, painting the small publishers of literary journals with the same broad brush applied to the Voldemorts of the peer-engine-review process who have used publish-or-perish requirements to command usurious subscription prices for their publications. Why not drop the subscriptions, if the "content" is "available"? Why not stick it to "The Man"?

*The Weekend Read: Jerome Weeks  
on a Book All Criti...*

*Saturday Roundup*

*In Other News*

*Reviewing Books: One Door Shuts,  
Another Opens*

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*To see Who Voted for What and  
Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain  
Books?*

But most small literary journals are barely break-even, if that, and survive through the sheer force of will of all members of the delicate serial ecology: publishers, writers, subscribers, and libraries. [White Crane](#), for example, is not some posh Elsevier publication; it's two dedicated guys working out of a living room, and they are not "the Man." Ancillary revenue-grants, university funding, conference fees-keep many of journals alive, particularly given how little they want for their subscriptions.

If, as the recent [Ithaka Report](#) on university publishing in a digital age suggests, librarians really want to help make the future, then it is time to stop engineering in the dark. [NBCC member Scott McLemee's take on the Ithaka Report [here](#).] Librarians could begin by exploring the subtle distinctions between journals that function primarily as mechanisms for generating research data--where the paper version is often pointless, and in fact the print publishing model adds an expensive time delay to the whole information-distribution model--and the mise en scene of the small, quirky, carefully-crafted, intentionally-organized print journals with their quarterly or even yearly publishing schedules. (I would suggest calling this the "Slow Reading Movement," but some might take that the wrong way.)

Librarians could also initiate conversations with humanities faculty and students about what, precisely, makes a journal what it is--"How a journal means," to paraphrase [a wise poet](#).

It's also time to initiate discussions about what a journal should look like five, twenty, or fifty years from now, and what it means to move that journal from print to electronic. The emerging open-access, digital model could eventually save at least some (if not many) members of an endangered genre, given the fragile economics of most small journals, which are further endangered by the recent postal hikes that privilege corporate publishers at the expense of the small press. But even then, this has to be done in partnership with publishers and readers.

Worst case, I would suggest humanities departments that cannot persuade their libraries to retain these titles to build their own local collections of small print journals, culling donations from alumnae, students, and faculty. If the librarians won't help you, then help yourselves. (Index the titles in [LibraryThing](#) so they are later findable by saner generations.)

Finally, individual readers have a responsibility to sustain these journals. My writing instructor, Lewis Buzbee, frequently exhorted us to subscribe to the journals we submit to, insisting that we had a responsibility to help sustain the same journals we flood with our hopeful attempts. I'm not big league like these NBCC folks, but with a

*Writers Read Your Contracts*

*Earth to Academia*

*Medical Apartheid: Research  
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*

*Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon  
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?  
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad  
Review*

*Don't Know Much About  
Counterinsurgency*

## ***The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors***

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time  
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,  
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,  
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review  
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book  
Editor, Minneapolis Star  
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,  
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning  
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver  
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post  
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,  
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San  
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing  
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,*

couple of submissions under my belt, I understand my responsibilities to the world of literary journals as I never have before--and as I was never taught in library school. We are all part of the river--publishers, writers, subscribers, and yes, librarians.--[K.G. Schneider](#) *K.G. Schneider is a librarian and blogger in Tallahassee, Florida.*

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 6:40:00 PM



### **2 COMMENTS:**

 Daniel said...

Well said. We can't control the loss in newspapers, so literary journals have to survive if the book pages go out.

9:37 AM

 Christina said...

Much of this is true in the sciences and technology, too. Journals were formed to co-locate similar articles. Societies publishing journals did so as an extension of the community they built around meetings and to provide access to letters reporting new work to members who were peripheral to the invisible college. Journals had newsy front matter and job listings in the back.

In science, we're in a time when the journals are being disaggregated or blown to bits (to borrow from Evans and Wurster). Society journals are big business - seen as a revenue generating function, not a community. Scientists don't really affiliate with one or another anymore, but submit their work based on prestige and other factors.

American Institute of Physics and American Physical Society have created "virtual journals" to once again co-located the widely dispersed content. Another major physics publisher, the Institute of Physics (UK), is moving away from journals toward an article database model -- but they are also creating online communities for news and commentary.

Most, if not all, libraries are stopping print subscriptions in favor of e-only. Some are even weeding back issues. Unfortunately, when some journals were scanned, only the "archival" articles were retained. Historians of science are out of luck! Scientists also need the news articles and special supplements containing meeting abstracts. These are frequently missing in the online versions from the original publisher -- and are seldom included in the large databases from the aggregators. The institutions that feel that they can replace journal subscriptions with large databases of shoddy scans added a year late are sorely mistaken!

*Philadelphia Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,  
Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,  
Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner  
Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC  
Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.  
King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie*

*Moshin Hamid on Camus,  
Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay  
Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an  
Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of  
2006*

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are  
Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's  
Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's  
Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War  
Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating  
Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing  
Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha  
Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and  
Different Cultures and  
Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda  
Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping*

I wonder now, while writing this, if the combination of online community and article database might be the future?

It seems for the literary journal, that its role is different -- that individual, not library copies are required?

5:42 PM

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### **LINKS TO THIS POST:**

[The statue on the green: the fate of small literary journals](#)

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[ode to print journals?](#)

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8/10/2007

## Edmund Wilson's Traditions in Peril



The Library of America is publishing [the critical writings of Edmund Wilson](#) in a two-volume set in October. [The NBCC is sponsoring a panel discussion on Wilson with the Library of America on October 11; more details to come.]

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*James Marcus*

*Maureen McLane*

"Literary Essays and Reviews" covers the 1920s through the 1940s, when Wilson was the pre-eminent book critic in the country. He was much more -- a widely traveled journalist and war correspondent whose book, "To The Finland Station," was one of the first histories of the Russian Revolution.

Wilson was also a leftist activist during the 1930s, a chronicler of the early days of the Depression, a playwright, memoir writer and a self-taught expert on the Dead Sea Scrolls.

No literary form, from the Symbolist poets to mystery novels, was immune from Wilson's analysis. His strong and erudite criticism, written largely for the New Republic and the New Yorker, set a standard for American literary commentary that's seldom approached these days. He died in 1972.

The Library of America plans future editions of Wilson's writings after the 1940s.

Novelist John Updike has followed in Wilson's critical shoes at the New Yorker. A new collection of reviews and remarks, "[Due Considerations: Essays and Criticism](#)," will also be released in October.

These upcoming books, while worthy of mention in any event, provide another way to view the growing debate between the print and digital worlds over writing about the arts.

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Book blogs proliferate these days, fed by the growing ranks of unemployed newspaper reviewers like Jerome "Book/Daddy" Weeks. Meanwhile, the print media's dedication to criticism grows as thin as objectivity on Rupert Murdoch's Fox News channel.

Film reviewers were the first to feel the pain of a growing movement in newspapers to concentrate their dwindling resources on local coverage and leave movies to The Associated Press or Roger Ebert.

What's happening across the country from Denver to Atlanta are downsizing and reorganization. Having a film critic, and in Atlanta's case, a book editor, classical music writer, art critic and drama reviewer, is no longer important. "Unique local stories" are.

According to a story in the American Journalism Review, Main Street is where many papers have decided to make their stand, dropping the national entertainment beat and other areas of news.

Sticking with the movie theme, it's like "The Titanic." As the ship nosed headfirst into the sea, the hardier passengers fled to the stern, sending the rest, like the critics, to Davy Jones' locker. Of course, the stern eventually sank, too.

Meanwhile, the bloggers, safe and warm in the Carpathia, continued to flail merrily away on their Internet sites.

"We're the future, if not even the present," they announced, while offering to pick up what few print survivors remained. "We have unlimited space, a wide array of contributors and, what's so cool, links to all the other bloggers out there."

In a lot of cases, there are also no editors or owners to answer to, but generally, the literary blog postings are provocative and fresh, much like Wilson's columns were 60 years ago.

The difference is that Wilson had a context to work in, framed by the well-tested structure of the print world.

It was a world defined by scholarship, relevance, accountability and the tacit understanding between writer and reader that they share a common ground.

I agree with critic [Sven Birkerts' argument](#) that the tradition of print -- the responsibility that goes with a finished product, rather than the shifting, 24-hour nature of the Internet -- remains the finest way to explain and preserve our culture.

Unfortunately, the lure of the Web, with its easy, all-access features and

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[Around the World on Friday](#)  
[Thinking About New Orleans #10: Questions for Jame...](#)  
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[To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive](#)  
[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?](#)  
[Writers Read Your Contracts](#)

its growing influence in American life, has seduced many newspapers and magazines into abandoning what made them successful in the first place -- the singular, identifiable voice of regional columnists and reviewers who know the territory.

It was once feared that the homogenized, trained accents of announcers on network radio would blur regional dialects. It didn't happen. Now, there's a more serious threat to regional culture, as the print media abandons its unique qualities to follow the Pied Piper of cyberspace.-  
-Bob Hoover, Book Editor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:45:00 AM



## 4 COMMENTS:

 Daniel said...

You're a fool. Plan for the change to the internet or be left behind, because economics — *not* personal choice — is moving media in that direction. It's like writing an essay disparaging a hurricane, thinking it will change its course.

10:09 AM

 lawrencemeyerson@att.net said...

As a rather conservative student in the wild 60's reading Finland Station was an eye opening and liberalizing, if not radicalizing experience. To this day I think it was the most influential book I've read.

It's also interesting to note that Wilson's review of Ulysses was remarkable for its insight.

1:51 PM

 Anonymous said...

I can't believe you're comparing anything other than a massive tragedy with great loss of life to the sinking of the Titanic.

Colleen Mondor

6:38 PM

 genevieve said...

Interesting. My great-uncle, one of the foremost Australian biblical scholars of his day, reviewed Wilson's self-taught expertise on the Scrolls in the very first issue of an Australian literary journal, *Quadrant*, in 1956.

Plus ça change...

9:02 PM

POST A COMMENT

# CRITICAL MASS

*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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[www.bookcritics.org/blog](http://www.bookcritics.org/blog)

8/30/2007

## Guest Post: Morris Dickstein on the Critical Landscape Today



*This piece appeared as the President's Column in the summer issue of the Newsletter of the ALSC (Association of Literary Scholars and Critics). For information about membership, about the ALSC journal *Literary Imagination*, or about the upcoming conference in Chicago,*

*Oct. 12-14, you can go to <http://www.bu.edu/literary/>."*

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*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the NBCC Board of Directors (see list of bloggers below).*

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OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, the erosion of space for book reviews directed at general readers has reached critical proportions. The tipping point was the departure of Teresa Weaver as book review editor of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, not to be replaced. This propelled the National Book Critics Circle into a campaign to save book reviewing. Its petition protesting Weaver's dismissal attracted over 5,700 signatures. Also this spring the Associated Press closed its book review desk, the Raleigh News-Observer eliminated the post of full-time book review editor, and there were cutbacks at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the San Diego Union-Tribune, and, most dramatic of all, the Los Angeles Times Book Review, one of the best book review sections in the country, which ceased being a stand-alone Sunday section and was folded into the Ideas section. To make up for some loss of print space, the editor, David L. Ulin, shifted some features to online only, as he

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

[Eric Miles Williamson](#)

[Art Winslow](#)

[Full blogger bios available here](#)

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*[In Retrospect: Patrick Neate on Breaking Up With H...](#)*

*[Thinking About New Orleans: Joshua Clark on Katrin...](#)*

*[In Other NBCC News](#)*

explained in a telling interview posted by the president of the NBCC, John Freeman.

All this suggests that the publication of book reviews for a general audience is in dire straits, largely because newspapers and magazines themselves are under terrific pressure - from the Internet, where much of the advertising has migrated; from corporate owners, whose shareholders expect a better return on investment; and from editors who feel that books have become a specialized taste and book reviews are a marginal form of journalism, little more than free publicity for publishers. They have no such compunction about reviewing movies, since this pays the bills. Adam Shatz, the literary editor of *The Nation*, writes to me that "we live in an age where people who used to pay attention to book reviews pay more attention to movie reviews. Books are still read and enjoyed, but the pleasure is had at the expense of analysis and criticism, as if the latter somehow robbed us of the fun instead of adding to it. And doubtless there are commercial considerations as well, with Hollywood buying more ad space." It's no surprise that money talks, but could it also be that the action has simply moved on?

Literary journalism has always been the bastard child of serious criticism and 'real' journalism, the hard stuff, you know, about serial killers and five-alarm fires along with local politicians and U. S. Senators. Book review editors often have difficulty convincing their bosses that the news about books is in the books themselves, not in mega-buck contracts, bestseller chitchat, and profiles of famous authors. Truly conscientious reviewers are not exactly a beloved breed: authors sensitive to criticism detest them, publishers would love to coopt them, and academics rarely respect those who write for a wider public, not for other scholars. Yet book reviewing is where talented young critics often get their start. It encourages them to be generalists, keeping in touch with contemporary writing. It forces them to write quickly and clearly and to put flesh on their arguments, eschewing the abstract jargon of many professionals. And it contributes to a cultural conversation otherwise dominated by hot TV shows, blockbuster movies, and media-manufactured celebrities.

In the case of nonfiction books about urgent issues such as war, foreign policy, human rights, and civil liberties, far more people will absorb the arguments through reviews than from the volumes themselves. When they display independent critical judgment based on real knowledge, such reviews serve as valuable complements to editorial pages and op-ed columns. They build up a viable public culture. Sharply argued reviews, along with interviews and feature stories, can turn an important book into an Event, a moment of reckoning. Without such reviews, we're left with high profile pseudo-events produced by expensive hype and shrewd marketing.

[In Other NBCC News](#)

[In Retrospect: Karen Long on](#)

[Patrick Neate's "Wher...](#)

[The Critical Library: Anne](#)

[Fadiman](#)

[What to Read this Fall](#)

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[Review: Part II](#)

[NBCC Announces Week-Long](#)

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[In Retrospect: Patrick Neate's Hip-](#)

[Hop Playlist](#)

[K'Naan's "Soobox"](#)

## **Past Posts Of Note**

[Reviewing 101: John Updike's](#)

[Rules, which he admits  
breaking.](#)

[Speaking of Updike: The safety of](#)

[criticism and his writing  
routine, and feeling glum about  
the future](#)

[The NBCC's Tips For Successful](#)

[Book Reviewing](#)

[George Orwell on Book Reviews](#)

[Why Book Reviews Matter](#)

[The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30](#)

[Books in 30 Days](#)

[How We Choose Links for](#)

[Roundup](#)

[What's Graphic and What's a](#)

[Novel and who's trying to ban  
them?](#)

[Pub Date? What Pub Date? also](#)

[Embargo Follies](#)

[On Reviewers' Notes and Writing](#)

[in Books](#)

[The Rest of the Best: The Books](#)

[That Didn't Make it Onto the  
NYTBR Best Book Survey](#)

[Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'](#)

[Best Book Survey](#)

[To see Who Voted for What and](#)

[Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive](#)

Reviews are even more vital to the assimilation of literary works, which can't depend on topical interest to attract readers. A handful of literary titles do well because their authors are known quantities, as familiar to their admirers as famous actors. But intelligent reviews - and the word-of-mouth that followed - helped build their renown in the first place. With the decline of book reviewing, who will take the measure of the next generations? The term "standards" may seem old-fashioned in our anti-elitist culture. But critical standards are essential not to impose hierarchy but to celebrate genuine craft, imagination, and human interest, or to show where they fall short, even in the work of talented writers. Useful reviewing comes in many guises: rapturous accounts of thrilling new discoveries, interpretive discussions of complex literary careers, and killer reviews targeting inflated reputations. All can serve a worthwhile purpose.

We shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking that most reviews do this well. Reviewing, like any form of writing, is a demanding craft. Too many reviews consist of banal plot summaries laced with unsupported judgments or opinions. Stung by uncomprehending reviews, Henry James described literary journalism in 1891 as "a periodicity of platitude and irrelevance," adding that "it had nothing in common with the art of criticism." Yet James himself had written a mountain of periodical reviews, and they form an amazing part of his legacy. Even obtuse reviews help build a conversation around the important new publications. Skeptical editors have a point - they do constitute free publicity - but for books that are more literary than commercial - for midlist fiction, for example, or for poetry - this is the only publicity they're likely to get, since publishers will scarcely advertise them.

Luckily, at the higher end of the cultural spectrum, serious book reviewing is somehow holding its own. Though Partisan Review folded in 2003 (after 69 years) and Herb Leibowitz's indispensable Parnassus: Poetry In Review, set to publish its last issue this fall (after 35 years), has received a two-year reprieve, thanks to an article in the Wall Street Journal by Willard Spiegelman, many key publications and book review pages miraculously survive, including the New York Times Book Review, the New York Review of Books, the TLS, Bookforum, the London Review of Books, The Nation, The New Yorker, The New Republic, The American Scholar, The New Criterion, the reinvigorated Poetry, the Boston Review, the American Poetry Review, the Threepenny Review, and a surprising variety of old-style literary quarterlies like Salmagundi and the Virginia Quarterly Review.

Some observers, I'm sure, would look to online blogs as a substitute for printed reviews. They might argue that the Internet, though it has undermined many publications, offers a more accessible venue to prospective writers and Web-surfing readers. As far as I can see, a

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?*

*Writers Read Your Contracts*

*Earth to Academia*

*Medical Apartheid: Research Ethics and Reviewing Ethics Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies? This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad Review*

*Don't Know Much About Counterinsurgency*

## **The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors**

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly*

strong case can be made only for online magazines like Slate and Salon or highly selective portals like Arts & Letters Daily, which most resemble the print journals and literary miscellanies on which they're modeled. These are edited sites, much like print publications but quite unlike the river of complaint, prejudice, and enthusiasm that makes the Internet so egalitarian. Since everyone has political opinions, political blogs have thrived where literary blogs have faltered. The real site of literary comment on the Web is not the blogs - apart from our own blog, The Valve, and the personal blogs of prolific scholars like Michael Bérubé - but the intriguing customer reviews on Amazon, which differ little from the customer reviews of travel destinations, computer software, and home appliances. It's nice that the Internet is a talk-back medium, with articles dragging long tails: a buzz of reader reactions, however fatuous. But book reviews, to be of any value, demand a trained sensibility and real critical expertise; they need to furnish more than rough-hewn consumer guidance and the colorful peevishness of the man in the street.

Though it is built on reading and writing, the Internet is seen as the enemy of literature, digging the grave of the printed book. But just as the computer lent new fluency to the act of writing, the Internet has revolutionized literary research, allowing instant access to vast bodies of information that would have required arduous labor only yesterday. It has amplified the reach of print publications by becoming a prime carrier of the printed word, creating a simultaneous worldwide audience for publications great and small, local and national. But the economic crisis afflicting newspapers and magazines, which has battered literary journalism, shows how the Internet is eating away at its own foundations, the printed sources of so much of its real content. The blog will not make up the difference, at least in its unedited form as a spontaneous effusion, a personal diary in shorthand. As Adam Kirsch has written: "Bitesized commentary, which is all the blog form allows, is next to useless when it comes to talking about books. Literary criticism is only worth having if it at least strives to be literary in its own right, with a scope, complexity, and authority that no blogger I know even wants to achieve."

*Morris Dickstein is president of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics. He was a charter member of the National Book Critics Circle, recruited by Nona Balakian, and a member of the board from 1983 to 1989. He is the author of several books including "Double Agent: The Critic and Society," "Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970" "A Mirror in the Roadway: Literature and the Real World," and "Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties," a finalist for the 1977 NBCC prize for criticism.*

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

Frank Wilson, *Book Editor,*  
*Philadelphia Inquirer*  
Jennifer Reese, *Staff Critic,*  
*Entertainment Weekly*  
Carole Goldberg, *Book Editor,*  
*Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner*  
*Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC*  
*Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.*  
*King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie*  
*Moshin Hamid on Camus,*  
*Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay*  
*Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an*  
*Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of*  
*2006*

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are*  
*Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's*  
*Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's*  
*Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War*  
*Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

*Q & A with Kiran Desai*

*Eliot Weinberger on Eating*  
*Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing*  
*Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha*  
*Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and*  
*Different Cultures and*  
*Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda*  
*Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 10:50:00 AM



### **12 COMMENTS:**

 **Richard** said...

Morris Dickstein was a perceptive critic in his day.

12:22 PM

 **Dan Green** said...

Alas how that day has passed.

3:46 PM

 **Jon H** said...

If Adam Kirsch believes what he wrote, that the "blog form" allows only "bite-size" commentary, he must also believe that the "newspaper form" is inappropriate, forcing the commentator into using an inverted pyramid structure, requiring the commentator to answer who/what/where/when/why questions that are irrelevant, and demanding multiple sources for everything.

Yet newspapers have long been a venue for critical commentary, and the NYTimes Book Review and others remain so. Kirsch's notion that blogs have a restrictive 'form' is if anything even more ridiculous than the notion that commentary in newspapers would be restricted to the same format used for the majority of articles.

So Mr. Dickstein does himself no favors by paying attention to Mr. Kirsch.

The two of them should examine the mini-seminars done online at the Crooked Timber blog. The mini-seminar on Mieville's *Iron Council* involved a number of blogger contributors, as well as feedback from the author.

While posted as a series of long individual blog posts, one per essay, it is also available collected as a pdf. The whole thing together is 49 letter-size pages' worth of material, with no pages dedicated to ads for underwear, car dealerships, or expensive watches.

That is an example of what blogs are capable of. Nothing 'bite-sized', spontaneous, or ill-considered about it. (It is possible, you know, to compose a message in an editor before posting to a blog. There's no need to do all the writing all at once in the little text field. You can take as much time as you want.)

If Crooked Timber's mini-seminars are vastly outnumbered by bite-sized short posts, well, that's really no different than how, in

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping  
Work Under Her Hat*

*Curtis Sittenfeld: What She's  
Working On*

*Tom Bissell: What He's Working  
On and What He's Reading*

*Jonathan Lethem: What He's  
Working On*

*Ian McEwan on his Writing  
Process*

*Don DeLillo on Actors and Death*

*Lawrence Ferlinghetti on Teaching  
Poetry*

*Dave Eggers on Generosity*

*Kazuo Ishiguro on Memory*

*John Updike on Michiko Kakutani*

*Mary Karr on Roth and Updike  
and "Blood Meridian"*

*Curtis Sittenfeld on "White Noise"*

*Andrew Sean Greer on "The  
Amazing Adventures of Kavalier  
and Clay"*

*Madison Smartt Bell on Best Books*

*John Irving on John Irving*

*Thomas Mallon on "Underworld"*

*Stewart O'Nan on "The Things  
They Carried"*

## ***Thinking About New Orleans: A Series About New Orleans Writers Post Katrina***

*Brad Benischek*

*Jason Berry Part I*

*Jason Berry Part II*

*Susan Larson*

*Jason Berry (Part I)*

*Jason Berry (Part II)*

*Brad Benischek*

*Thinking About New Orleans: An  
Update (6/04/07)*

*James Lee Burke*

*Ken Foster*

*Louisiana in Words*

*Joshua Clark*

print, highbrow literary commentary is vastly outnumbered by  
Page 3 girls, sports, gossip columns, and horoscopes.

It has nothing to do with a 'blogging form'.

2:45 AM

 Anonymous said...

One must not confuse decline of a medium or genre with overall decline. Those of my acquaintance most likely to read for pleasure are those least likely to subscribe to newspapers, so the editors' decision to trim a feature unappealing to their surviving readership is probably largely right. But the internet is certainly more than able to make up the difference. Mr. Dickstein himself gives several examples. More importantly, Mr. Dickstein describes blog entries as short, but more accurately, they can be described as whatever length the author feels is appropriate, which is very different. The tyranny of the column inch is no more, and this should be a cause for celebration. Write to the length a subject calls for, and post where persons interested in that subject go.

There are, however, more general problems of review and criticism. One is partisanship. When it comes to "non-fiction" most of those alleged surviving bastions of book reviewership will rate more highly the most shoddily researched leftist hatchet job than they will anything or anyone who thinks Edmund Burke or Ayn Rand may have had a point. Yes, there are some equally partisan reviewers on the right, but Mr. Dickstein didn't even mention them, which makes my point.

In fiction the literary establishment, reviewers and critics alike, is coming to resemble popular depictions of Custer's Last Stand: a dwindling band using futile tactics. The reviewers avoid by training, habit and inclination anything which smacks of "genre"--that is, anything read by more than 5,000 people nation-wide. Since I know that the general fiction reviewers won't review anything I would want to read, why ought I to read the reviews?

The critics cast their nets somewhat wider--it must be VERY hard to get another Faulkner or Fitzgerald article published these days--but are equally unhelpful. If the purpose of book reviews is to point out those books (non-fiction) one OUGHT to read, and (fiction) those one would ENJOY reading, literary criticism should enhance one's understanding and appreciation of the book. Instead, whole MLA meetings are dedicated to efforts to do neither, and whole styles of criticism devised for that purpose.

The last writings I purchased which helped me to better understand and enjoy an author I liked were a series of trade paperbacks from DelRey and an author's life put out by MonkeyBrain Books. They'll never see the inside of the New York Review of Books. Why should I?

--Robert Piepenbrink

6:55 AM

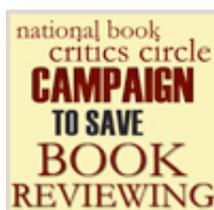
Julie Smith

Andrei Codrescu

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Tom Piazza

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 Josef said...

*Though it is built on reading and writing, the Internet is seen as the enemy of literature, digging the grave of the printed book.*

Depends on where you're looking from, I suppose. I just released my [debut novel](#), and 3 weeks on I've gotten rave reviews and 1,500 readers.

But, of course, I can understand how the publishing industry might have problems with the lowered barriers to publication and reaching an audience.

8:46 AM

 ROBERT said...

While Mr Dickstein is a useful literary critic he doesn't add much to the ululating on diminished book review column inches. Newspapers have bigger problems than servicing the few of its readers who read books —though that would be an important core of the newspaper audience. Basically, the big city newspaper is a reminder of the good old days, a nostalgic artifact. Vital to the 21st century? I dont think so...

Pat Holt has it right. Newspapers do such a piss poor job of covering books why should anyone care except for careerists trying to move up the food chain of literary journalism? In this day to still be denouncing web literary coverage is almost laughable and most definitely inexcusable recalcitrance.

Can someone show me where any creditable research shows that readers are troubled by the vanishing review pages?

4:47 PM

 Anonymous said...

the problem is that there is no material to criticise! where are the dicks, vonneguts, swarthouts, lou camérons, thomas mcguanes of yesteryear? and post modernism has comitted us to literary nihilism of hot house flowers who have never actually done anything

8:34 PM

 Dave Burnett said...

Take a look at the two-part article by Bryan F. Griffin (Panic among the Philistines, Harper's Magazine, August-September 1981) to see why most of us who love books and cherish writing are not sad to see most literary criticism disappear from public view.

3:28 PM

 Anonymous said...

And why is *who Adam Kirsch knows* any proof of anything?

*June 2008*

*July 2008*

*August 2008*

*September 2008*

*October 2008*

*November 2008*

*December 2008*



As Adam Kirsch has written: "Bitesized commentary, which is all the blog form allows, is next to useless when it comes to talking about books. Literary criticism is only worth having if it at least strives to be literary in its own right, with a scope, complexity, and authority that no blogger I know even wants to achieve."

7:49 PM

 [Search Engine Optimization](#) said...

Aside from the complex physical connections that make up its infrastructure, the Internet is facilitated by bi- or multi-lateral commercial contracts (e.g., peering agreements), and by technical specifications or protocols that describe how to exchange data over the network. Indeed, the Internet is essentially defined by its interconnections and routing policies.

As of December 30, 2007, 1.319 billion people use the Internet according to Internet World Stats. Writing in the Harvard International Review, philosopher N.J. Slabbert, a writer on policy issues for the Washington, D.C.–based Urban Land Institute, has asserted that the Internet is fast becoming a basic feature of global civilization, so that what has traditionally been called "civil society" is now becoming identical with information technology society as defined by Internet use. - [web design company, web designer, web design india](#)

10:03 AM

 [Amrit Ray](#) said...

I believe this is something that really cannot be stopped and should not be resisted. People are reading less and less of print media and turning more towards the internet due to its easy availability and accessibility. And it might not be a bad idea after all to put your book reviews online where you can have a wider audience and reviews from

8:39 AM

 [Web Design](#) said...

I don't think I would ever enjoy reading a book on the web though.

3:23 PM

[POST A COMMENT](#)

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[Newspapers in 2020, 'localism,' and 'analytic journalism'](#)

[Feed, September 17, 2007](#)

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*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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9/03/2007

## Must Read: Steve Wasserman on How Newspapers Can Do Better



Former NBCC board member [Steve Wasserman's much anticipated essay on the decline of newspaper book coverage](#) is finally available online at the [Columbia Journalism Review](#), and it's well worth reading. It covers a great deal of the pitch on this issue -- America's (and newsrooms') anti-intellectualism, the role of advertising, readership levels, demographics, the quality of reviews (and sometimes lack thereof) in newspapers around

the country, changes in book retailing and the role of the internet in making literature more accessible to more people. He also does some thinking on how much audience one truly needs to have a literary culture in America.

Most importantly, however, it puts forth a call to action that manages to be optimistic without being silly, and urgent without wallowing in its dourness. From his experience as editor of the LA Times Book Review -- and a firm belief in the Poundian ethos that "[Literature is news that stays news.](#)" -- Wasserman believes it's possible to have a mass audience and an intelligent discussion. He believes we have to: "[Readers] know in their bones something newspapers forget at their peril," he writes: "that without books, indeed, without the news of such books -- without literacy -- the good society vanishes and barbarism triumphs."

[Do check it out](#) -- and stay tuned here for a Q&A this week with Steve,

### WHAT IS THIS SITE?

*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the [NBCC Board of Directors](#) (see list of bloggers below).*

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who will be appearing on an NBCC panel in New York City on 9/14. Hopefully out of the discussion sure to develop from this piece (and the CJR panel which is being held about it) will be some ideas about how newspaper editors and owners can creatively rise to this challenge. How they can not just deliver us the news about what our culture is thinking about itself, but do it a little smarter, a little better. -- JF

\*\*

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 7:49:00 PM



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9/06/2007

## The Critical I: Steve Wasserman



*This week, former NBCC board member Steve Wasserman published a long piece in the CJR on the current changes in newspapers*

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*and newspaper book sections. It draws upon his experience as a book editor, as an agent, and as former book editor of Los Angeles Times. The piece is well worth reading. In the meantime, we thought it might be good to talk to Steve about some of the issues the piece raises. Here's what he had to say.*

Q: In "Goodbye to All That," you talk about the fact that many book reviews across the U.S. are poorly written, simply argued, boring, or just too short to tell us anything substantial. What should newspapers do to rejuvenate the form? Are there any ties or habits you can point to that need to be declared verboten? Are there any sections outside the big three you mention which do well with their resources at a short length?

A: What is missing, alas, in most newspapers are substantive and authoritative and compelling considerations of books that matter. Tics and habits that enfeeble many newspaper reviews are matters for remedial writing courses. What is most scarce is the desire on the part of newspaper executives and editors to treat readers as adults capable of embracing nuanced and lively criticism. Reinventing the form requires owners to decide that books matter.

[Scott McLemee](#)

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Q: You refer to Pound's notion that literature is news which remains news. Considering how much news about the Bush administration has been broken in book form, it seems like there's also a lot of news which is simply news. As incoming literary editor at [Truthdig.com](#), how do you feel newspapers have done at handling this trend? Does it crowd out the kind of literary criticism you would have published at the LA Times?

A: [Newspapers, famously, are the first draft of history.](#) Books provide an arena for deeper reflection and exploration than can be accomplished in newspapers which are notoriously hostage to breaking news. It is no surprise that some reporters (for example, the late David Halberstam, to take but one exemplary example), feeling the limits and constraints of the newspaper form, embrace books as the medium of choice when it comes to trying to understand the shifts of the tectonic plates that make up the political and social geology of our era. Where newspapers fail to report the news as it happens, their obligation to do so after the fact is all the greater. Banishing books and the news they contain is a double betrayal.

Q: It seems if anything, one of the largest impacts the web might have on reviewing is the pushing forward of an even more subjective model of reviewing (with blogs, etc). I suppose you could argue that any review which pretends toward objective is telling you a lie. Still, what do you think the impact of this will be on literary conversation?

A: Good writing (which is to say, good thinking) will always triumph over bad writing (which is to say, bad thinking). The problem here is the technical ease with which the web dignifies shoddy thought by presenting it in a way that aesthetically (justified margins, graceful fonts, pleasing format) confers an unwarranted gravitas upon even the most coarse and supercilious of opinions. Thus, the web permits a thousand flowers to blossom as well as a thousand stinking roses. In the end, however, content rules.

Q: It seems that as newspaper sections trim back magazine sections expand. Bookforum is bigger than ever, the New Yorker, the Nation and others are doing very well. And there are new book publications popping up all the time. Not to play devil's advocate, but if your argument that book sections like the LA Times play to a higher income, higher educated bracket already, are we really losing anything when these newspapers sections are cut back? Surely those same readers will just get the same information from John Updike now?

A: The proliferation (in print and online) of forums devoted to the review of books is all to the good. Mostly they will appeal to the already obsessed. The erosion of coverage in larger publications directed to a greater swath of the citizenry is significant because it threatens the idea

*Jack Kerouac Knocked Me For a Loop, Then Got Me Ro...*

*What to Read this Fall*

*Guest Post: AJC Books, Two Months Later*

*The Critical Library: Sam Tanenhaus*

*NBCC Links & News*

*In Retrospect: Peter Taylor's "A Summons to Memphi...*

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*To see Who Voted for What and Why in the NYTBR Best Book Survey, scroll through the June '06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain*

that it is possible to enroll the public in a cultural discourse essential to a healthy democracy. The balkanization of the audience is oddly made easier by the web which encourages a pernicious identity politics. How to resist the withering of the agora and the consequent compartmentalization of cultural criticism is the challenge before us.

Q: One of the benefits of newspapers moving toward the internet, it would seem, is that book sections can put up many more reviews, blogs, interviews, etc. -- since the majority of their costs before were newsprint. Surely, though, this puts a greater strain on editors. Since the competition is going to be fierce for traffic, what will prevent papers from simply rushing things on and up online?

A: Victory will go to those publications that understand that accuracy and authority are key to building the bonds of trust without which no publication (or blog), whether print or web, can build an enduring (and growing) readership.

Q: Assuming some readers, some accidental readers -- people who stumble upon the book page, etc. -- get left behind in the cultural shift to web-based reading, how do you propose newspapers reach these readers with criticism? Do you believe they should try? Do book reviews and literacy have anything to do with one another?

A: Of course book reviews and literacy have a good deal to do with one another, as I tried to argue in my piece in the Columbia Journalism Review. In order to survive (and flourish), the newspaper profession must do all it can to promote reading, to raise the level of cultural conversation. It should wage this battle on all fronts: in print, online, and in the community (by organizing book festivals, sponsoring literacy programs).

Q: Did the LA Times Book Festival ever make money while you were involved in it, and if so, did that revenue ever flow back into the section or did it simply fall back into the paper at large? Europe and England have a festival culture, and their lit pages are healthy in part (one could argue) because the two (seem to) work in concert. I'm curious if you think it possible to duplicate that in America.

A: The only year the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books lost money was in its first year, in 1996. Ever since (or at least until my departure in 2005), it has made a profit, but, alas, none of that revenue was ever invested in the Book Review section.

Q: How do you think awards fit in to the shrinkage of newspaper coverage? Are you comfortable with prizes being seen as a brand which people use to buy fiction without thinking? If it gets people to read a book who may not have otherwise done so, is that such a bad thing?

*Books?*

*Writers Read Your Contracts*

*Earth to Academia*

*Medical Apartheid: Research  
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics*

*Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon  
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?  
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad  
Review*

*Don't Know Much About  
Counterinsurgency*

## ***The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors***

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time  
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,  
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,  
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review  
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book  
Editor, Minneapolis Star  
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,  
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning  
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver  
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post  
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,  
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San  
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing  
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

A: The proliferation of awards may have the effect of diminishing their prestige, but, sure, two, three, many awards. Let no book, however mediocre, go unrewarded. Every book will eventually find the readers it deserves.

Q: What should we expect of your new section at Truthdig? What do you think you'll be able to do there that will be different from the LA Times? And finally, since it will of course be asked, how do you answer people who say this is a conflict of interest since you are also a literary agent?

A: Too soon to tell. As for a conflict of interest, we shall avoid reviewing books by authors we represent.

Q: Since you've been outside the book review editing job, how has your reading changed? Have you discovered anyone new (outside your client list of course) that you think readers should know about?

A: Working another station in the kitchen hasn't changed my promiscuous reading habits. I can recommend the marvelous novel, "[Beyond Sleep](#)," by the remarkable late Dutch writer Willem Frederik Hermans, just published by Overlook Press.

\*\*

Labels: [Criticism](#), [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [The Critical I](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 10:39:00 AM



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9/14/2007

## Leave Work Early Fool!



TODAY the NBCC has given you the best quasi-legitimate work excuse you will get this month (if you work in publishing or book related endeavors) to leave work early. At 4:30 PM we continue our [symposium on the future of book coverage](#) with two panels at [Housing Works](#), featuring a range of writers and critics and publishers, from [Erica](#)

[Wagner](#) of The Times (UK), pictured left to [Dwight Garner](#) to [Dave Weich](#), the media mastermind of [Powells.com](#). For more information call Housing Works at (212) 334-3324.

\*\*

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Upcoming Events](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 8:20:00 AM



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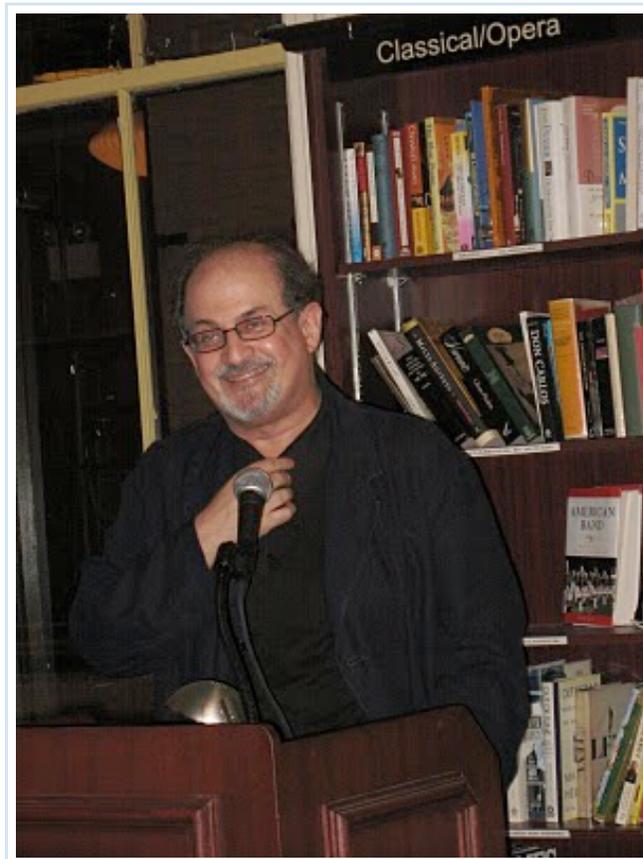
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9/14/2007

## Hats Off to Salman Rushdie



[Salman Rushdie](#), who appeared with Stephen Colbert on *The Colbert Report* in the Spring in support of the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviewing, dropped by Housing Works last night as the NBCC wrapped up a day of panels (*Grub Street 2.0: The Future of Book*

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Coverage and What We Talk About When We Talk about Books: Can Criticism and Promotion Coexist Today) to offer moral support, noting how much space has been lost from book pages over the last year.

"Writers and book reviewers need each other," said Rushdie, a graceful and astute critic himself. "I remember an [essay](#) about *Midnight's Children* by Robert Towers in "The New York Review of Books" that taught me about the book." First novelists in particular need critics. "How do you learn about new writers, if not through reviews?"

Newspaper book reviews and literary blogs are not at odds with each other, he added. The two forms coexist and, he said, "We need both."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

Maureen McLane

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POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 9:42:00 PM



#### 1 COMMENTS:

 Tao Lin said...

"How do you learn about new writers, if not through reviews?"

internet

12:16 PM

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9/17/2007

## Keeping Literary Magazines in Libraries: Susan Thomas Has a Suggestion



This is the year of the flip, the final shift in university libraries around the country to a higher proportion of electronic database subscriptions than print subscriptions. Throughout the country, public and academic librarians are eliminating periodicals from shelves, partly

to free up shelf and storage space, but mostly because of a budget squeeze. Scientific journals are expensive (subscriptions can run a hundred dollars or more). As a sort of collateral damage, literary publications, which are much less expensive and in some cases impossible to duplicate in digital form, are disappearing, too.

This latest development in book culture was the focus of the September 13 NBCC panel, "Literary Magazines Go Electronic: Now Where's the Print Edition in the Library," cosponsored by [Library Journal](#) and moderated by LJ book review editor and NBCC board member Barbara Hoffert, who noted, "The fate of literary magazines may hang in the balance." The panelists included Karen Gisonny, head of periodicals at

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the [New York Public Library](#); Brigid Hughes, editor of [A Public Space](#); Jeffrey Lependorf, executive director of the [Council of Literary Magazines and Presses](#) (formerly CCLM); author [D.T. Max](#), NBCC member and Nona Balakian award winner Scott McLemee of [Insidehighered.com](#), Kevin Prufer, NBCC board member, poet, and editor of [Pleiades](#), and Susan Thomas, a librarian at the [Borough of Manhattan Community College/CUNY](#).

Prufer inspired the panel when, as described in his [post](#) on Critical Mass, he dropped by the library at the University of Central Missouri to catch up on the latest poetry reviews and discovered that quarterlies like the Kenyon Review, Antioch Review, Virginia Quarterly Review, and others were no longer on the shelves. The librarian directed him to the electronic database. But digital format, he noted, cannot duplicate publications like the Virginia Quarterly Review, which are carefully curated from graphics and special paper to fiction by authors like Nadine Gordimer, who did not sell electronic rights to the story the VQR published recently.

Library subscriptions are a substantial portion of the income for some literary magazines, Lependorf pointed out. Newsstand sales to bookstores are in danger right now, as well, he added, because a major distributor went out of business recently. And one commonly used database for literary magazines is intended for archiving, not for current publications; the newest versions are three years old.

Susan Thomas (pictured above) offered a solution for academic libraries: Lobby the librarians. And lobby the provost, the dean of humanities, the vice president, the president. Ask them to keep literary magazines and small press publications on the shelves. "Reading a literary magazine is such a relief after hours at the computer screen," she said. "My job is to encourage young people to become lifelong learners. They lose interest in reading on the computer. If I can put an exciting literary magazine in their hands, it can be important." This approach can also work for public libraries.

That was not the only good news of the evening. Brigid Hughes said that she had no problem convincing librarians in college and university with MFA programs to subscribe to [A Public Space](#). (The publication also has a complementary website.)

Karen Gisonny of the New York Public Library has maintained a strong periodicals collection; the NYPL also houses the print archives of the collected thousands of publications of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses and CCLM.

Prufer had the last word of the evening. After his protest to the librarian at the University of Central Missouri, he said, the

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*Around the World with the NBCC on Friday*

*Adichie Rocks the House Tonight & NBCC and Library...*

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*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times' Best Book Survey*

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*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?*

subscriptions to the quarterlies he loved were restored.

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:21:00 PM



### **2 COMMENTS:**

 Anonymous said...

Science journals subscriptions can run a hundred dollars or more? Try "more"--many of them are **thousands** of dollars a year, some are five figures. I think the top science subscription at the library where I work is \$80k.

--a librarian

7:10 AM

 Jane Ciabattari said...

Thanks. Wow. No wonder they are a budget issue. Meanwhile, subscriptions to some literary quarterlies can run from \$8 to \$24 a year....All the more reason for humanities departments to band together to ask the question, why take out the literary magazines at the same time...

9:22 AM

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9/17/2007

## Grub Street 2.0 Recap



I was about to write-up the [Grub Street 2.0](#) panel from last week, but then someone showed me a writer in the audience named [Richard Grayson](#) has recorded it practically verbatim (thank you, Richard!)

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You can read his dispatch [here](#), which is great, and another [here](#) from NBCC member Michael Orthofer, who captures a point I wish I had made/asked while the panelists were in the room. The internet has certainly -- at least for me -- helped to internationalize book coverage. One can read the literary news of any English speaking country in the world now at no cost instantaneously, and with a little dusting off of your high school English/Spanish/German, that of many other foreign countries, too. I can't help but think that will change the nature of literary discourse, and make old blind-spots a little less defensible as the literary community begins to be defined by what one can find with their browser, not at their bookstore. (Although it won't help if we continue to translate as few books as we do at the moment). Still, I'm curious if this has already begun to change literary coverage (in all medium) today.

\*\*

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

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9/18/2007

## Panel Recap: What We Talk About When We Talk about Books

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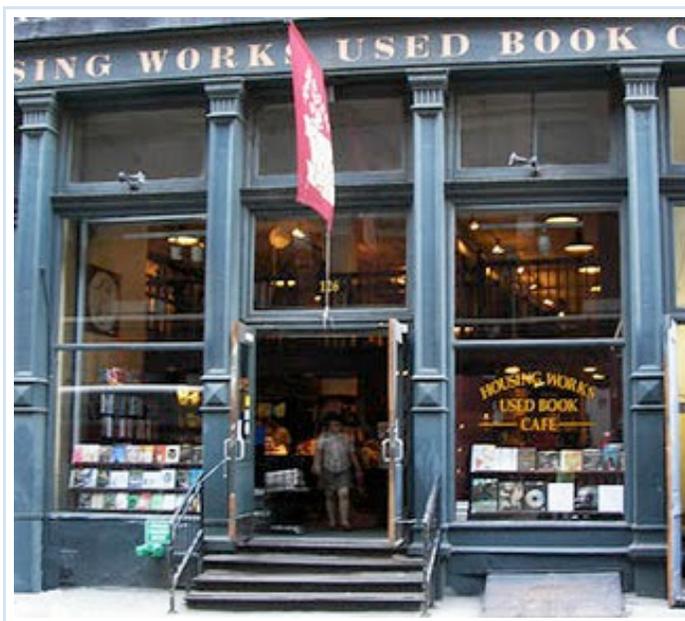
*Jane Ciabattari*

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If reading is a solitary pursuit, how can publishers reach a mass audience? What role (if any) do book reviews play in this process? And what can be done

– by reviewers, by publishers, by authors – to reverse the slide in reading and appreciating books among Americans?

Several panelists addressed these questions at last Friday's NBCC panel, "What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: Can Criticism and Promotion Coexist Today?" at the Housing Works Bookstore Café in Greenwich Village. Participants included David Kipen, director of the National Endowment for the Arts' National Reading Initiative; Nan A. Talese, publisher of the Nan A. Talese/Doubleday imprint; Eric Banks, editor-in-chief, Bookforum; Dawn Davis, editorial director of Amistad; and Dave Weich, director of marketing and development for Powell's books, the Portland, Ore. bookstore and on-line book retailer. NBCC president John Freeman moderated.

Kipen kicked things off by questioning whether there really is a slide in Americans' reading habits. Formerly the book critic for [The San](#)

[Scott McLemee](#)

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[Francisco Chronicle](#), Kipen acknowledged recent “not-so-encouraging polls, that [1 in 4 people in America hadn't read a book in the last year](#)...it's demoralizing until you consider that in 2002 there was a poll that indicated that 1 in 2 people in America hadn't read a book.” If the poll numbers are meaningful, “we've cut that figure in half.”

Kipen said the endowment's “[The Big Read](#)” program “stole [Seattle](#) and Chicago's idea” of the “One Book” program. These programs, in which interested readers in a particular city read the same book, open up the discussion of the “one book” to many people.

Kipen encouraged critics to have hope - “don't wring your hands when you could be making common cause with the rest of the country.” Readers all over the country can now access the [New York Times book review online](#), but Kipen said readers “still want good local book reviews as much as they want local news.”

Panel moderator Freeman asked Nan A. Talese how she would get the word out about a talented but unknown author today.

Talese said that literary novels generally sell about 4,000 copies. Using Ian McEwan as an example of a “literary” author who made it big, Talese noted that Americans didn't know about McEwan until his seventh novel.

Only recently has the American reading public become interested in the Man Booker Prize, Talese said. [When McEwan won the Booker for “Amsterdam” in October 1998](#), the timing was fortunate: Talese was able to get “Amsterdam” into bookstores in America by Christmas. When his next book, 2002's “Atonement” came out, he had developed an American audience.

But not every Booker winner catches on with the American public, and timing can make a difference. “[Sacred Hunger](#)” by [Barry Unsworth](#) was published in April. When it won the Booker in October 1992, most of the books had already been returned by bookstores to the publisher, Talese said.

Reviews, Talese said, “are part of a very, very gradual process of building excitement.” Sometimes reviews help, sometimes they don't - she's seen a book review get front-page treatment in the New York Times, and “the needle never went up.”

Dave Weich of Powell's Books said that [Powell's online operation](#) has an ongoing program to “differentiate ourselves from our competitors.” Reviews play a part in that - Powell's-type readers are interested in reading book reviews, negative and positive - “By providing independent voices, we would build integrity,” Weich said. “We do

*Keeping Literary Magazines in Libraries: Susan Tho...*

*In Retrospect: W. Jackson Bate's life of Johnson*

*Reading Season*

*Hats Off to Salman Rushdie*

*Leave Work Early Fool!*

*Must Read Friday: Scott McLemee on The Last Intell...*

*Around the World with the NBCC on Friday*

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*Reviewing 101: John Updike's Rules, which he admits breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of criticism and his writing routine, and feeling glum about the future*

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*George Orwell on Book Reviews*

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*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain Books?*

publish negative reviews. We want our readers to feel like they're getting the truth. For Jonathan Franzen's "The Corrections," we published four or five uncensored, unedited reviews."

Freeman asked Eric Banks of Bookforum if the language of promotion has affected criticism. Banks said that's not an issue in his publication, but "Bookforum is different. We give people enough space to unfold an argument." He added that what Bookforum chooses to review is in and of itself a form of promotion - "We select what we think folks are going to know about and talk about." Though a primary source of Bookforum's revenue is publisher ads, Banks said there's a firewall between ad content and review coverage.

Freeman asked Dawn Davis, editorial director of Amistad, if the extraordinary reviews received by Edward P. Jones' "The Known World" made a difference. Davis said they did: "We got a (great) New York Times review before publication. Then we got the Washington Post, the Christian Science Monitor. It kept the energy going. It keeps the faith internally. Suddenly it's not just the editors saying, 'that's a great book' - it's the outside world."

Weich said reviews play a part in determining which authors to promote - "there are just too many books for us to get through them all, to read them all." But it wasn't just Ian McEwan's stellar literary reputation - it was his "articulate and consummate professional nature" that made him a good choice for Powell's first "Out of the Book" feature film.

Talese said McEwan, a veteran of the wear-and-tear of the traditional author's tour, was thrilled with the idea of the film, which was shown in bookstores around the country - McEwan called "a virtual tour" a "fabulous" idea. Weich said Powell's was surprised by the reception to the film in small to medium sized cities, especially in the Midwest, where "name" author like McEwan don't generally tour. And at the Harvard bookstore, the bookstore sponsored a contest in which people wrote about their "first time" experiences (McEwan's latest book, "On Chesil Beach," is about two honeymooners) - the winner read the submission at the bookstore.

Banks of Bookforum said some promotional efforts can work at cross-purposes with the review function of a publication. "I'm a little uncomfortable with podcasting.... if you interview the author on Tuesday on a podcast, how can you trust the review that runs in this publication? Authors aren't going to want to participate in a podcast when there's been an honest but negative review of their books."

Talese said books and the literary arts are a challenge to promote because "human beings are social beings, and of all the arts, books are

*Writers Read Your Contracts  
Earth to Academia  
Medical Apartheid: Research  
Ethics and Reviewing Ethics  
Criticism For Sale??*

*No Buzz Marketing or Amazon  
Paybacks*

*What to do with review copies?  
This or maybe this.*

*The Best Way to Respond to a Bad  
Review*

*Don't Know Much About  
Counterinsurgency*

## **The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors**

*Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time  
Magazine*

*Mark Rotella, Review Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

*Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author,  
Investigative Reporter*

*Karen Long, Book Editor,  
Cleveland Plain Dealer*

*M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review  
Founder*

*Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book  
Editor, Minneapolis Star  
Tribune*

*Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor,  
South Florida Sun Sentinel*

*Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning  
News Staff Critic*

*Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver  
Post*

*Marcela Valdes, Washington Post  
Book Notes Columnist*

*Fritz Lanham, Book Editor,  
Houston Chronicle*

*Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San  
Francisco Chronicle*

*Sybil Steinberg, Contributing  
Editor, Publishers Weekly*

*Frank Wilson, Book Editor,  
Publishers Weekly*

the only ones that are solitary.” It’s a worthwhile challenge to try to deliver to many people simultaneously the voice of the author. The “social” factor is one reason book clubs spontaneously became a phenomenon in this country.

Weich of Powell’s said that “if the book industry has failed, it’s in the lack of options they’ve afforded the reader. It’s true that reading is solitary, but the marketing of the book can’t be solitary. I’d love to sit around with my friends and talk about a book, but they haven’t read those books.” That was one germ of the idea around the “Out of the Book” film project.

Freeman asked about the debate within the literary world over whether the kind of conversation created by Oprah Winfrey around books, is a good thing.

Weich said that “for a long time the lit establishment has had control over that dialogue, about what makes a ‘good’ book and why people should read them. It’s been a monologue. I wish reviewers would think less about their personal tastes and judgments and more about what kind of audience is right for this book.”

After the panel, author Salman Rushdie made a brief appearance and highlighted some of the discussed themes - “However much we bitch about each other, it’s clear that we need each other,” he said. “How do you draw attention to new writers who don’t get on the cover of the magazine? Print and new media compliment each other very well.”

Mary Ann Gwinn

NBCC board member

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 7:15:00 AM



### **1 COMMENTS:**

Tony Christini said...

"Freeman asked Eric Banks of Bookforum if the language of promotion has affected criticism. Banks said that’s not an issue in his publication, but “Bookforum is different. We give people enough space to unfold an argument.” He added that what Bookforum chooses to review is in and of itself a form of promotion - “We select what we think folks are going to know about and talk about.” Though a primary source of Bookforum’s revenue is publisher ads, Banks said there’s a firewall between ad content and review coverage."

So more than language and content of reviews, the simple

*Phuaaetpma Inquirer*

*Jennifer Reese, Staff Critic,*

*Entertainment Weekly*

*Carole Goldberg, Book Editor,*

*Hartford Courant*

## **Critical Outtakes: Discussions With Writers**

*Convergences With NBCC Winner*

*Lawrence Weschler*

*A Conversation With NBCC*

*Winner Julie Phillips*

*A Conversation With Barbara J.*

*King*

*Talking With Chimanda Adichie*

*Moshin Hamid on Camus,*

*Immigration, and Love*

*An Interview With Melissa Fay*

*Green*

*Wole Soyinka on Becoming an*

*Activist*

*Dick Adler on the Best Books of*

*2006*

*Richard Powers*

*Simon Prosser on What People are*

*Talking About in London*

*Robley Wilson on What He's*

*Reading*

*Elizabeth Evans on What She's*

*Reading*

*T. Christian Miller On War*

*Profiteering, part 1 and part 2*

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*Eliot Weinberger on Eating*

*Intestines in China*

*William T. Vollmann on Doing*

*Drugs as Research*

*Caroline Moorehead on Martha*

*Gellhorn*

*Kiran Desai on Home and*

*Different Cultures and*

*Developing Characters*

*12 Questions for Chimamanda*

*Adichie*

*5 Questions for Amy Helpel*

*Allegra Goodman on Keeping*

appearance of the review at all is the thing, as both Weich and Banks point out. And of course the books "folks are going to know about" are often the ones most heavily publicized. Just as class exists in society at large, it exists in publishing, obviously. If reviewers are not making conscious and transparent efforts to offset class-provided visibility, they are going to perpetuate the readership of the well-funded publishers and books, to the detriment of the books and readership being outclassed often in dollars alone, or in precious little other way.

Moreover, a lot of these high dollar class books - like such films and TV shows - either don't deserve single book reviews or are far more well understood when compared and contrasted with a variety of related books, including some books that cannot afford their own publicity (or cannot get published in the first place, or are effectively discouraged from even being written, for further reasons of class).

Scratching the surface here. Soon the rich assortment of the status quo begins to look as relatively impoverished as it is relatively flush.

3:05 AM

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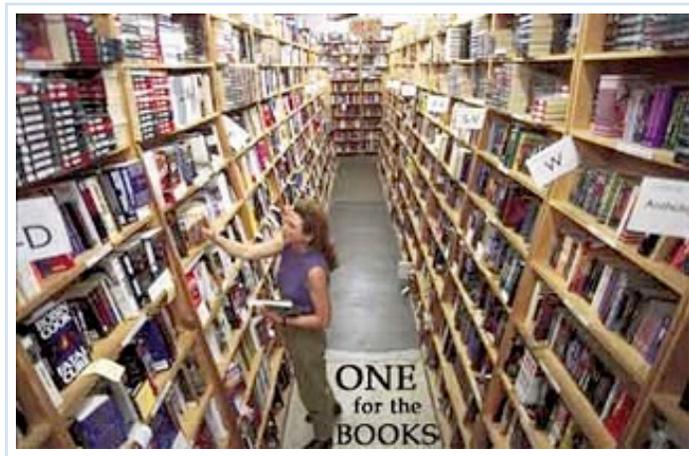
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9/18/2007

## What We Talk When We Talk About Books



*The NBCC hosted [Powells.com](#) marketing director [Dave Weich](#) on our recent panel, "What We Talk about When We*

*Talk About Books."* To collect his thoughts about the question of whether promoting and critical culture can coexist, Dave put together this essay.

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The question, for me, isn't whether book criticism and promotion can coexist. They do coexist, to the point of being almost inseparable. The question to ask is what either one, criticism or promotion, might look like without the other.

Most published reviews focus on books that recently arrived in stores. These titles will never again enjoy such an opportunity to gain a readership. Draw attention to a book by reviewing it and you are, in effect, promoting it. You might trash it, but your attention confirms that the book is worthy of conversation. Compliment it and you're practically giving it breath.

A trade secret I'll share: Booksellers read reviews to confirm or deny suspicions we have about books we haven't yet read. We can't read everything. There's simply not enough time. So we ask, "What did PW say?" "Did Kirkus like it?" Often we'll take a chance with a title -- or we won't -- depending entirely on how it's been described by a reviewer we trust; the next thing we know, we've read it, enjoyed it, and told dozens

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

[Rebecca Skloot](#)

[Lizzie Skurnick](#)

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(if not hundreds or, online, thousands) of people to give it a try.

Every day, our customers wander up to the information desk and ask about a title they saw reviewed in the [Times](#) or [The Oprah Magazine](#) or [Bookforum](#). Maybe Bookforum doesn't reach the masses, but its pages speak with authority to a passionate microculture that happens to be, sacrilegious as this may sound, consumers of exactly the kind of book to which Bookforum devotes column inches. Whether a "marketplace" -- uncover your ears, Freeman! It's nothing but a word -- ever figured into the calculations of the reviewer or the review's distributor, the book's commercial future can't help but be affected by a review.

How many new books were published in the United States last year? Close to two hundred thousand, if I remember correctly. [The National Book Critics Circle](#) serves fewer than eight hundred members, I believe. Do the math. Every author's enemy is silence.

But let's set aside for now the battle for our reading culture's mindshare. A well written review, whether positive or negative, makes me want to decide about the book for myself. It activates my curiosity. At the very least, I'll seek out another review, a second opinion.

Reviewers: Why spend your time and energy reviewing a book that wouldn't be of interest to at least some portion of your readership? The author could fail on every meaningful level, the book could be complete garbage, but if it was worth your attention in the first place one must assume that some portion of your audience, under the right circumstances, would consider reading it. After all, most books worth discussing have at least some redeeming qualities. If you didn't believe that, why would you write about books?

But you can't always write about your favorites, can you? You can't get by focusing exclusively on the ones you reread again and again. You rarely have the opportunity to read a book in full more than once, I'd bet. You have deadlines. And editors. And if you do this well enough to get paid for it, that's likely because someone, somewhere, will pay to read what you write, or to advertise beside it, or to fund it in the name of the arts. You are a vital cog in the commercial engine of bookselling - - more impactful (and certainly more immediate) to that financial machine, I would argue, than to posterity or any longstanding canonical record.

I am not being cynical. I do not mean to discount what you do. I am thankful for reviews. They make my job so much easier. They enrich my life. I only mean to point out that the cheering you hear in the fourth row behind home plate, and the booing from the upper deck, it's all promotion of a kind, for one team or another, for the sport. Reviews promote reading. What every reader needs is advice about what's worth

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their time. Every writer yearns for someone to recommend their work. I speak not only of authors of books, but of reviewers, too.

When you submit to the [Cleveland Plain Dealer](#) or [Virginia Quarterly Review](#), does not some part of you hope that a reader will be so intrigued by what you've written that they'll go straight out and buy the book? Or, otherwise, to buy another book that, by way of comparison, you claim to be more valuable?

No matter. Within days, an excerpt of your review is posted on the product pages of online book stores, possibly on the author's own web site. Truly glowing or insightful blurbs soon appear in publishers' press kits, and eventually make their way into the pages, or onto the cover, of paperback editions. And so the promotional wheel turns.

--Dave Weich is director of marketing and development for Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of [more than 200 interviews with writers](#), and the creator and producer of the [Out of the Book film series](#), which debuted in June with a feature about Ian McEwan's Man Booker Prize-nominated novel "[On Chesil Beach](#)." This November, Out of the Book's second installment, a film about David Halberstam's final, great work, "[The Coldest Winter: America and the Korean War](#)," will be screened in nearly 75 cities across America.

Labels: [Guest Posts](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 8:00:00 AM



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9/18/2007

## Dawn Davis: Did Book Reviews Help Edward P. Jones?



Dawn Davis, editorial director of *Amidstad*, edited [Edward P. Jones's](#) novel *The Known World*, which won the National Book Critics Circle fiction award and the Pulitzer award in fiction in 2004. When she appeared at the NBCC panel on "What We Talk About When We Talk About Books: Can Criticism and Promotion Coexist Today," moderator John Freeman, NBCC president, asked if book

reviews helped Jones's book.

"We got a New York Times review in the daily, the Christian Science Monitor, the Washington Post, very early on. What reviews did do was keep the book in the bookstores and keep the internal interest and get producers interested. Review attention keeps the faith. We as editors have to sell the book internally. Outside reviews are validation."

Davis mentioned that Anna Deavere Smith read "An Orange Line Train to Ballston," a story from Jones's first collection, *Lost in the City*, which won the PEN/Hemingway award, at Symphony Space in 2004. Jones published a second story collection in 2006, *All Aunt Hagar's Children*. And, she added, "Oprah does a good job of getting 900,000 people to read a book people wouldn't necessarily have heard about."

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

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10/29/2007

## See Jerome Speak

Jerome Weeks, [long-time NBCC member](#), former [book critic at the Dallas Morning News](#), and [patron of bookdaddy.com](#), will be hosting a panel this weekend at the [Texas Book Festival](#) called **Lit Crit: The State of the Book Review**, featuring, among others, former Balakian winner [Steven G. Kellman](#), members [Ed Nawotka](#) and [Jessa Crispin](#), and critic and NPR radio commentator [Alan Cheuse](#). Before you start whingeing about this being yet another panel on this topic, [Jerome has a caveat](#):

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"In our defense, book/daddy must confess that a panel on the troubles in book reviewing was his idea -- almost a year ago, I pitched it to Clay Smith, the director of the festival. This was long before the dismissal of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* books editor, before the cutbacks at the *LA Times* and elsewhere, before the uproar in litblogs, before the National Book Critics Circle's "[save the endangered book page](#)" [campaign](#), and before everyone else and his cousin had presented a panel on the same topic.

Our panel will just be *better* than everyone else's. So there."

\*\*

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 2:44:00 PM



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11/06/2007

## The State We're In

Over at Kottke.org, NBCC member Joel Turnipseed has curated an interesting week long series of posts by Steven Johnson, NBCC board member Rebecca Skloot, Douglas Wolk, and others about the state we're in these days. -- on several fronts. Today NBCC board member [Jane Ciabattari answered a few questions](#) posed to her about criticism today, blogging, and the NBCC's spring campaign to save book reviews.

*JT: Anyone who's worked at a newspaper knows how discomfiting it can be to see all the books that go unreviewed—that's something you don't hear a lot about: questions about who gets reviewed, why, and so on. The world's bloggers may not be the best critics (though many are wickedly smart): but from the writers' and readers' and publishers' perspectives, wouldn't we all be better off if publishers sent 100-200 galleys of every book to the 100-200 most-prominent bloggers in the circles of interest most likely to buy or enjoy a given book? It seems like there's a lot of inefficiency in the marketplace—and a place for a burgeoning trend here, doesn't it?*

*JC: As much as it makes sense to send galleys to prominent bloggers, I think you have to think first about readers; ultimately, the majority of online readers still go to newspaper websites for their information. The evolution of newspapers continues. Beginning in September, the Audit Bureau of Circulation will combine print and online circulation of newspapers, which I believe will show a better picture of what has been going on in the United States. In July, for instance, 59.6 million people visited newspaper websites, a 9 percent increase over the same period a year ago. Nearly [eight in ten adults read a print or online newspaper](#) each week. As I've noted, many of the best literary bloggers are writing for newspaper book review sections and online websites. Readers are also going to communities like [Readerville.com](#), which is a terrific website for readers and writers. Internet space may be infinite, but readers are pressed for time: I suspect quality will out, online or off.*

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 4:07:00 PM



#### 1 COMMENTS:

Len said...

The mistaken assumption here is that the relationship between lit blogs and newspapers boils down to an either/or situation. Newspapers are shifting to online versions. That is the future. However, that does not mean that lit blogs will go away or that it will make sense in the long term for publishers to ignore their presence. The truth about our modern Internet now-a-go-go world is that people usually go to a variety of sources before making a decision on any purchase, books being no exception. People are likely to draw on several sources--online newspapers, lit blogs, and even those horrid little reviews on Amazon--when assessing whether or not to purchase a book.

Lit blogs, even ones run by nonprofessional reviewers, can comfortably coexist with online newspapers. Properly cultivated, they could even help drive readers to online newspaper reviews. In other words, the relationship between lit blogs and newspapers isn't competitive, it's symbiotic. And the sooner that professional book reviewers start warming to lit blogs, the better for them.

10:30 AM

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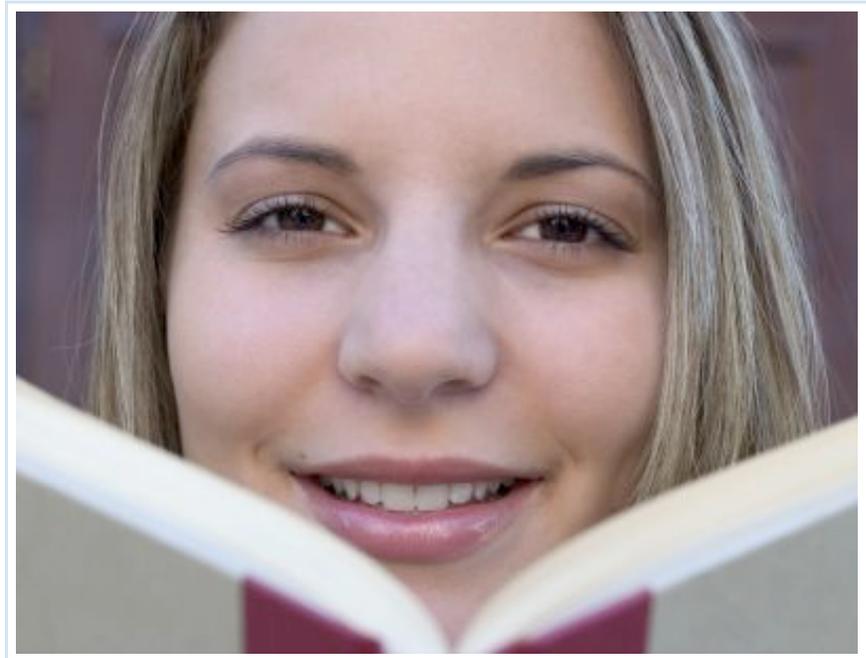
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*the blog of the national book critics circle board of directors*

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11/21/2007

## Reading at Risk, Redux



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The NEA has released a new, deeper study about reading in America, which has been much remarked upon. The Washington Post ran a story two days ago which summarized some of the points. It looks like we do a decent job of getting children to read at young ages, but neglect them as they enter adolescence -- with 15-24 year-olds reading just 7-10 minutes per day by choice.

This data seems pretty unequivocal -- we need to do better -- but I'm sure it will be open to debate as to what those solutions should be. I found it interesting that the NEA's chairman took the time in Publisher's Lunch to point out something we've always believed:

"Oddly, one of Gioia's recommended solutions is more coverage of books in popular culture: "I guarantee that if we could expand the coverage in the media, you'd immediately see people responding. People are looking for things to do that aren't dumb. I don't think that Americans are dumber than before, but I do believe our public culture is."

[Scott McLemee](#)

[David Orr](#)

[Jennifer Reese](#)

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[Announcement and LitPanels i...](#)

[The Critical Library: Gerald Howard](#)

If you want to talk back to this story, tell us what you think here, or you can go over to [Sarah T. Williams' in depth column](#) at the [Star Tribune](#), which has a comment section [here](#).

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [reading](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 3:06:00 PM



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12/04/2007

## Half as Much Fun

Just when it seemed [the cutbacks in newspaper book sections had struck bone](#), they've gone deeper yet this month. Starting on December 30th the [Chicago Sun-Times' book section](#) -- formerly run by [Cheryl L. Reed](#), now by [Teresa Budasi](#) -- is being reduced by half, and moved from the Controversy section of the newspaper to the Show section. All reviews are being reduced by half, as well, to 250 to 300 words.

These are grim times, as anyone who works in the newspaper industry will tell you -- and all sections are being affected. It feels especially too bad to see this happen at the Sun-Times, though. In the wake of the Chicago Tribune's move to running books on Saturday, the Sun-Times began running a ramped up section, even advertising (above the fold) as "the only books section on Sunday" in Chicago. The paper was treating books as a selling point.

It feels like there is still an opportunity for a visionary newspaper publisher to really go against the tide, and invest heavily in books -- say, connect the newspaper to local events, to sponsor a book festival, host a podcast or a radio show, run a blog, draw in local novelist or two as columnists, email its reviews out to subscribers, host web-only content, run Q&As with authors passing through town, start a book-club, reach out to non-book-industry advertisers -- and tap into the still very large group of people who care about reading. (It's worth noting that [Frank Wilson does some of this in Philly](#), as does [the New York Times](#), the [LA Times](#), and the [Guardian](#)).

The good news here is that the Sun-Times' section might possibly be able to get back some of its space back by running web only pieces. Let's hope that does happen, so they can maintain the diversity of voices the paper had become good at bringing forward in recent years.

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

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POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 7:30:00 AM



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12/04/2007

## PW Honors John Freeman and the NBCC



This week Publishers' Weekly released its year-end kudos to publishing honchos, and gave a nod to tireless

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NBCC president John Freeman and the NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviewing. "As 2007 comes to a close, there are...five people whose efforts this year and, in two cases, over entire careers, have helped the industry keep pace with change through innovation, commitment and bright, necessary ideas," the PW report begins. The section on "John Freeman and the NBCC" concludes, "Freeman's glass-half-full take is that since the events of last spring, non-newspaper organizations have stepped up. He commended Barnes & Noble's online review, Bookforum and the New Yorker for increasing and improving their coverage. And the NBCC has sponsored panels aplenty on the increasingly large role bloggers are playing in bringing book reviews to the public. One more upshot to the crisis? Freeman says he now has informants throughout the industry. "Someone will forward something to me saying, 'You better watch out for this.'"

*photo credit: David Velasco*

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 2:51:00 PM



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12/05/2007

## Old School



In spite of the cutbacks in many newspaper book sections, there have been a few creative gestures about how to handle books -- some in the most unexpected places, Scott McLemee wrote [in a recent column](#) about a new piece the Austin-American Statesman has begun running about academic books.

"Roger Gathman's "The Academic Presses"

debuted on Sunday in The Austin American-Statesman with a discussion of Gregory Clark's [A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World](#) (Princeton University Press) and James Simpson's [Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents](#) (Harvard University Press). Gathman has contributed to The American Scholar, The New York Observer, and Salon, among other publications. He has lived in Austin since doing graduate work in the philosophy department at the University of Texas in the 1980s; since then, aside from writing, he's worked as a freelance editor and translator.

His inaugural piece was striking, not just for the kinds of books it covered, but for how it handled them. Academic publishing now includes a wide range of more or less popular nonfiction – not to mention cookbooks, or guides to state bicycle trails, or whatever else must be done to pay the bills. But Gathman took on two specialized (if controversial and widely discussed) works of scholarship; and he

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[PW Honors John Freeman and the NBCC](#)

engaged with their arguments in as much depth as one humanly can, given the length restrictions of any newspaper other than the New York Review of Books."

It would be a terrific thing if this type of column took off in other towns -- Chapel Hill, New Haven, Providence, and Iowa City come to mind -- where there's a large audience of very intelligent readers who have become disengaged from the local paper. Iowa City, especially, could, and should have one of the best literary sections in the country if simply tapped into the hive of writers living nearby.

--John Freeman

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY CRITICAL MASS 7:30:00 AM



#### 1 COMMENTS:

 Gerald Howard said...

Hey, thanks for picking Uris Library at my alma mater, Cornell, to illustrate the piece.

6:07 PM

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12/05/2007

## Publishers to Honor National Book Critics Circle

*More good news for the NBCC. This just in from the Association of American Publishers (AAP):*

Washington, DC, December 5, 2007: The U.S. publishing industry will pay formal tribute to the National Book Critics Circle for its unique role in the nation's literary life, according to an announcement today by the Association of American Publishers (AAP). The NBCC has been named to receive the 2008 AAP Honors, an award given annually to individuals and institutions outside the publishing industry for significant achievements in promoting American books and authors. The AAP Honors will be presented to NBCC President John Freeman during the Association's Annual Meeting in New York on March 5, 2008.

Founded in 1974, the NBCC comprises nearly 800 active book reviewers joined in common cause to promote quality writing and enrich the nation's literary dialogue. In addition to its prestigious annual book awards program, each year the organization honors outstanding work done by an NBCC member with the Nona Balakian Citation for Excellence in Reviewing. Members of the NBCC Board of Directors speak out on the country's premier literary blog, Critical Mass. As newspapers across the country slashed book review space and fired experienced book editors in the name of belt-tightening, the NBCC decided to fight back and earlier this year launched the Campaign to Save Book Reviews, featuring blog posts by concerned writers, interviews with book editors "in the trenches," Q&A with newspaper editors and owners, a boots-on-the-ground protest in Atlanta, and more than a dozen panel discussions around the country to raise awareness of the issue. Since then the NBCC has fought to foster a national literary culture, creating a Best Recommended List, made up of the votes of its members and former book prize finalists and winners, and kicked off several new essay series on Critical Mass.

In announcing the award, AAP President and CEO Pat Schroeder said:

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"Since its founding more than three decades ago, the NBCC has played a central role in this country's literary dialogue, but never has its voice been stronger or more urgently needed. We're delighted to honor the NBCC for its passionate commitment to our favorite cause--spreading the word about great books."

The AAP Honors were inaugurated in 1997 to acknowledge the contributions of individuals and organizations outside the book industry who have helped focus public attention on American books and their importance in our society. Previous winners have included C-SPAN's Brian Lamb, National Public Radio, country music legend Dolly Parton who created the "Imagination Library" literacy program, The Today Show, Oprah Winfrey, Latino television journalist Jorge Ramos, and USA Today.

The Association of American Publishers is the principal trade association of the U.S. book publishing industry with some 300 members comprising most of the major commercial book publishers in the United States, as well as small and medium-sized houses, non-profit publishers, university presses and scholarly societies. The promotion of reading and literacy is among AAP's highest priorities.

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 12:42:00 PM



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12/06/2007

## In Other News



[The New Republic](#) has done an issue on books, worth checking out. It features an [editorial](#) by the editors which concludes with a few sentences that ought to be faxed out to newspaper owners at the start of each fiscal quarter:

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"The responsible and lively and ambitious coverage of books may not be much of a revenue stream, but it is a formidable thought stream, and knowledge stream; and it should be an honor to preside over it. When a book review is done well, it transcends leisure. It inducts its reader into the enchanted circle of those who really live by their minds. It is a small but significant aid to genuine citizenship, to meaningful living."

There's also [a review of Gail Pool's book on reviewing by James Wolcott](#), which is very thorough, contains numerous arrows back to pieces by the great [Wilfred Sheed](#) (pictured above), and includes this hopeful reminder of what book reviewing can be:

"You wouldn't divine from this landscape survey of the literary flatlands the thunder and illumination of which book reviews are capable when the right reviewer and the right book meet head-on. Book reviews at full billow can become cultural events: acts of exaltation (Mary McCarthy on *Pale Fire*), social advocacy (Dwight Macdonald on Michael Harrington's *The Other America*), reassessment (Brigid Brophy on Françoise Sagan), wrecking-ball demolitions (Macdonald on James Gould Cozzens's *By Love Possessed*, Sheed on Norman Podhoretz's *Making It*, Whittaker Chambers on Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, Alfred Chester on John Rechy's *City of Night*, Pauline Kael on Mailer's

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*[What to do In New York Tomorrow Night](#)*

Marilyn, Dale Peck's Sweeney Todd exploits in these pages), reconstructive character surgery (Clive James on Zachary Leader's biography of Kingsley Amis in the Times Literary Supplement), and literary resurrection (Gore Vidal on Dawn Powell). Why not reach for the stars?"

Over in England, Dinaw Mengestu's mournful and exquisitely poised debut novel, "[Children of the Revolution](#)," has won the [Guardian First Book Prize](#).

Alexander Yurkowsky on [Philip Whalen's "Collected Poems."](#)

NBCC member Joshua Cohen [recently reappraised Viktor Shklovsky](#) and Emuna Elon's "[If You Awaken Love](#)," "a serious and insistently dark comedy of politico-religious matters and manners."

Louis Menand on [why we read diaries](#).

Charles Simic [might make you want to eat with your hands](#).

Jon Sack sexes up the history of Iraqi Oil, says the Daily Star.

Labels: [Links](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 7:30:00 AM



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1/01/2008

## Steve Weinberg to Teresa Budasi of the Chicago Sun Times: "Hang in there..."



On the last day of 2007, my postal carrier delivered an envelope from Teresa Budasi, book section editor at the Chicago Sun-Times. Teresa had enclosed the Sunday, Dec. 23 book pages, with a sticky note containing three handwritten words: "Last big section."

Earlier in the year, Teresa had informed me and her other freelance reviewers that the book section would be reduced in size and scope. What a shame, because the "big section" contained so much wonderful material every Sunday.

Here is what greeted readers on Dec. 23, on five broadsheet pages:

\*Brief accounts by dozens of Sun-Times reviewers of the best books they read during the year.

\*Stand-alone reviews of six disparate books

\*A question and answer column with an author

\*A feature about holiday books for children

\*A do-it-yourself column about self-publishing

\*Budasi's story about a book-related board game

\*[Budasi's column](#), with a Dr. Seuss theme, about the section's downsizing. The headline said "How the Grinch Stole the Books Section."

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[Kudos to the Times-Picayune](#)

[Preview 2008: Terese Svoboda's](#)

["Black Glasses like...](#)

[Friday Afternoon Addictions](#)

Hang in there, Teresa. Please.

--**NBCC board member Steve Weinberg**

Note: Steve Weinberg is the author of the invaluable and annually updated "Publishing Your Writing about Books and Authors: The National Book Critics Circle Guide to Freelancing," which is available to NBCC members only. His book "[Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller](#)," is due out in March 2008.

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 1:05:00 PM



## 2 COMMENTS:



[Joan Stewart, The Publicity Hound](#) said...

Yes, it's a shame that so many newspapers are reducing or eliminating their book sections.

So rather than bellyache, here's what authors should do:

--Stop relying on traditional media to market your books.

--Start reading blogs that are tied into the topic of your book. Post comments, one of the best ways to get the blogger's attention, position yourself as an expert in your field, and get a valuable link back to your website.

--Start your own blog which will pull traffic from the search engines.

--Go over to Amazon and start posting reviews, articles, lists and lots of other content that ties into the topic of your competitors' books. You'll be reaching the same target audience, and it's a great way to let those people know about you and your book.

--Create pages on social networking sites like Facebook and on content-sharing sites like Squidoo. The search engines love these sites. Invite comments from visitors.

--Create videos that tie into your book, post them to YouTube, then embed the YouTube link in your blog posts, on your Facebook and Squidoo pages, and at your website. Google and the other search engines love video and will reward you with more traffic.

Hope these tips help.

2:13 AM



Anonymous said...

*Steven G. Kellman on Nabokov's  
"Lectures on Liter...*

*Quiet Time*

*Update: NBCC in San Francisco,  
January 2008*

*Valerie Martin: An End-of-Year  
Lagniappe*

*A Tribute and a Celebration: Siv  
Cedering's Last B...*

*The Must Read Friday*

*The Best Recommended in Stores*

## ***Past Posts Of Note***

*Reviewing 101: John Updike's  
Rules, which he admits  
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of  
criticism and his writing  
routine, and feeling glum about  
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful  
Book Reviewing*

*George Orwell on Book Reviews*

*Why Book Reviews Matter*

*The 2006 NBCC Finalists: 30  
Books in 30 Days*

*How We Choose Links for  
Roundup*

*What's Graphic and What's a  
Novel and who's trying to ban  
them?*

*Pub Date? What Pub Date? also  
Embargo Follies*

*On Reviewers' Notes and Writing  
in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books  
That Didn't Make it Onto the  
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'  
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and  
Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive*

*Why Do Critics Ignore Certain  
Books?*

On the review you wrote for " are we done yet?" I was reading it and heres what I have to say, Its a comedy! You really don't expect the chracter's role to be, smart, thoughtful and have good manners in a comedy! Its just not funny! I think its a good movie! But, its your point of view, so iam not going to argue. PLease don't reply.

1:37 PM

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1/10/2008

## New Orleans Times-Picayune Book Pages Update

*New Orleans Times Picayune book editor and NBCC member Susan Larson sends this update on the changes in her newspaper's book pages as reported in our December 30 [post](#):*

There's been a minor glitch in the debut of "The Reading Life," which will now make its debut next Wednesday, which will in future be its regular day. Wednesday was regarded internally as a better day for the section for strategic reasons. We'll have announcements on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, and on Wednesday, watch for our first section-- which will include a large package about New Orleans reading groups, the introduction of our movers and shakers column, as well a weekly books-in-store feature, and the return of the New York Times bestseller list, which will be the first in a rotating series of lists in the future. In addition, readers will be seeing a larger presence for books on our Web site, [nola.com](http://nola.com). The Times-Picayune stands by its commitment to book coverage--with our long history of fine writing, our lively literary culture, and the continued post-Katrina focus on our area, we have even more to write about!

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [Thinking About New Orleans](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 7:22:00 PM



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*Commentary on literary criticism, publishing, writing, and all things NBCC related. It's written by independent members of the [NBCC Board of Directors](#) (see list of bloggers below).*

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2/06/2008

## Goodbye to Frank Wilson

ONE OF THE THINGS I have dreaded most about the recent cutbacks in newspapers around America is the fact that many of the people I work with – in some cases, the very best of them – have an option to leave. It's remarkable how few opted *not* to opt out. Morale is in the cellar, papers are being attacked from all sides, and inside this storm editors are made to beg for fewer and fewer resources to create a quality 'news product.' (Yes, those are the words used these days).

A number of creative souls have done a lot with a little, but there is no magician quite so nimble with his fingers as [Frank Wilson](#), the book editor of [the Philadelphia Inquirer](#). Earlier this week I learned that [Frank finally decided to hang up his hat](#), and I cannot think of someone in the inky arts who deserves a long and restful golden retirement quite so much. In the past year, in the middle of several buyouts, cutbacks, and near constant talk about making less with more, he managed to squeeze reviews of over 400 books into the paper, giving the Inquirer – which is the eighth largest paper in the country – a first rate book page.

I've been writing for the paper for about eight years now, and Frank is my third editor in that time. He was the first to take the hot potato and run with it. Long before any newspaper outside [the Guardian](#) had twigged to the online world, Frank set up [his own book blog](#) and began running podcasts and guest posts, directing readers to reviews that were running that weekend, keeping tabs on literary debates and throwing up links to stories far outside the borders of Delaware County. That he did this on his own spare time tells you what kind of guy Frank is.

It wasn't just Frank's mindfulness of the future that made his section an inspiration, though. He began covering poetry in a serious way, started working creatively with local events (you can actually [see him in an NBCC event later this month](#)), and took for granted that the readers of his section cared about ideas. He brought in reviewers like [Scott Esposito](#) and [M.A. Orthofer](#) and [Kate Haegele](#) who have a point of view

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and unique and informed tastes. He covered genre literature seriously. He also put a hand out to young reviewers, something more and more of our sections need to do in order to stay fresh. It's embarrassing to say that these things are out of the norm.

That the man at the helm of all this whirling, energetic D.I.Y section was a Jesuit-taught, Kerouac-schooled, nattily dressed fellow entering his silver years with a grumpy streak and distinct conservative leanings disproved all the dichotomies that are so breezily batted around when people talk about literary coverage. By example Frank showed that there was potential in this truly disastrous loss, if we were creative. And that you needn't be coming from the 'online world' to be part of it. That with a little pizzazz and a sense of humor these cutbacks might be weathered and then maybe even reversed.

I will miss working with Frank quite a bit. Although we disagreed on many things, he was the type of editor who made that seem like a plaudit to you both – the sign of independent thinking. He is funny and warm, a great virtual host. For a man working in what is by all accounts extenuating circumstances, he did almost no complaining. I sensed he felt the real thing – the only thing – was out there, coming to his desk, in jiffy packs (surely by the hundreds). I gather in coming days he'll follow Seamus Heaney – or [Major Jackson](#), that son of Philadelphia – back to his garden, where he'll be beating back weeds, not budget cuts. That chokecherry should watch out. I mean the most respect when I quote Heaney: [By God, the old man could handle a spade.](#)

Labels: [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JOHN FREEMAN 6:29:00 PM



#### 1 COMMENTS:

[Frank Wilson](#) said...

What can I say, John? Thanks very much. By the way, just this evening I moved a review of Major Jackson's *Hoops*. May as well get another poetry review in while I still can.

8:18 PM

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2/07/2008

## NBCC at AWP: Jabari Asim on the Black Critical Tradition



*Former NBCC VP  
Jabari Asim, author of "The N Word," former deputy book editor of The Washington Post and current editor in chief of Crisis*

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*magazine, a preeminent journal of politics, ideas and culture published by the NAACP and founded by W.E.B. Du Bois in 1910, had this to say on the NBCC panel on the transition in literary criticism at the AWP (Association of Writers and Writing Programs) panel February 1.*

Before the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders issued a report in 1968 that led to a new and more colorful kind of newsroom, most African American authors pinned their hopes on being reviewed in such newspapers as the Pittsburgh Courier, the Chicago Daily Defender and the Baltimore Afro-American, and in large-circulation black magazines such as the Crisis, Opportunity, Messenger and, later, Negro Digest. They also found attentive audiences, hospitable forums and valuable feedback in New Masses, The Nation, The New Challenge and other politically oriented periodicals. It was in such pages that black America's literati sparred, cogitated and in some cases, bloviated. In the process, generations of astute critics rose and helped give voice to the authors clamoring up from Harlem, Natchez, St. Louis and Oklahoma.

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These important critical voices included George Schuyler, Hubert Harrison, Saunders Redding, Sterling Brown and Margaret Walker.

“The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” a groundbreaking essay by Langston Hughes, first appeared in *The Nation* in 1926. W.E.B. DuBois’ “Criteria of Negro Art” appeared the same year in *The Crisis*. Richard Wright’s calculating and provocative “Blueprint for Negro Writing” appeared in 1937 in *New Challenge*. The mainstream media, as we now call them, were frequently years if not decades behind such out-of-the-way but deeply committed journals. If not for the alternative and minority press, much of the African American literary output of the first half of the twentieth century would have been consigned to a fate comparable to that of Ralph Ellison’s immortal protagonist: it would have been invisible.

My personal discovery of the black critical tradition began in the library in college. I was shocked and awed by Hoyt Fuller’s “Towards a Black Aesthetic,” in which he dismantled the poet Louis Simpson’s 1963 review of Gwendolyn Brooks in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Week*. Simpson wrote, in part, Brooks’ *Selected Poems* “contains some lively pictures of Negro life.” He went on to assert, “I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro. On the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important.” Then I went backward to Margaret Walker, whose less-than-charitable and not entirely accurate assessment of the Harlem Renaissance noted, drily, “in the final analysis the audience and the significant critics were white.” I kept going until I reached Alain Locke’s seminal essay, “the New Negro.” “The day of aunties, uncles and mammies is gone,” he declared. “Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on.” I was hooked.

It’s probably no exaggeration to say that I manage to reflect on the fate of the African American writer on a daily basis. For twenty years it has been both my avocation and my occupation. I published my first book review in an African-American weekly, a piece on the great poet and fiction writer Henry Dumas, gunned down by New York subway police in 1968 in a case of mistaken identity. Goodbye Sweetwater gathered his short fiction in a single volume. During my four years as book editor of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, followed by 11 years at the *Washington Post Book World*, I’ve tried to keep close watch on developments in black writing while providing opportunities for African-American reviewers to show off their critical chops. I tried to make sure that no one could say what Margaret Walker charged so long ago: “in the final analysis the audience and the significant critics were white.”

Now, in some respects, I’m back where I started from: an African-American publication. Such magazines and newspapers are no longer reliable sites of great critical reportage. *The Messenger* and *Opportunity*

*What Are You Recommending,  
Carmela Ciuraru?*

*Around the World with the NBCC's  
Good Reads*

*NBCC Awards Finalist in  
Biography: Arnold Rampersa...*

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Steven Pinker?*

*Among the Voters*

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Rules, which he admits  
breaking.*

*Speaking of Updike: The safety of  
criticism and his writing  
routine, and feeling glum about  
the future*

*The NBCC's Tips For Successful  
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*What's Graphic and What's a  
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them?*

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in Books*

*The Rest of the Best: The Books  
That Didn't Make it Onto the  
NYTBR Best Book Survey*

*Why I Didn't Vote In The Times'  
Best Book Survey*

*To see Who Voted for What and  
Why in the NYTBR Best Book  
Survey, scroll through the June  
'06 Archive*

are long gone, and just this week the Chicago Defender announced that will no longer be a daily. Effective Feb. 13, it will move to weekly publication. At the Crisis, we face the same pressures everyone else is wrestling with, including declining ad revenues and the challenge of slicing a smaller pie into increasingly slender wedges. Some publicists with whom I've had long professional relationships send me books in the same quantities as they did when I was at the Post, but I'm forced to be even more selective, brutally so. When I was at the Post, I shared my colleagues' misery stemming from our inability to assign every book we thought deserved attention. Multiply that misery about 50-fold and you'll have some idea of what it's like at the Crisis.

I've edited two issues since coming aboard in August. In my first issue, I published three reviews, including works by August Wilson, a critical study of Ida B. Wells and a novel by Chris Abani. The next issue I gave the entire review space over to an essay commemorating the 50th anniversary of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. I ran a strip alongside the essay, briefly noting an additional five books, and I also ran a fine feature on commercial versus literary fiction by Eisa Ulen, who presented here today. I wanted to do more but it wasn't possible.

Our singular, significant blessing is a solid readership of 250,000—and that's not counting newsstand sales. So far our readers have not suggested that we alter our traditional approach to cultural coverage, which involves focusing on writers and artists of accomplishment without regard for market trends and commercial status. Our informed and passionate subscribers both encourage us and remind us of a fact persuasively expressed by the great critic Sterling Brown back in 1939. Writing in *Opportunity*, he argued, "Without great audiences we cannot have great literature."

At Crisis, we're determined to hold onto the former while doing all we can to advance the latter.--Jabari Asim

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#), [NBCC Dispatches](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 8:35:00 AM



### **1 COMMENTS:**

 Mike said...

Mr. Asim mentions the period between 1926, when Langston Hughes's artistic manifesto was published in *The Nation*, and 1937, when Richard Wright's artistic manifesto was published in *New Challenge*, but then jumps to the 1960s, which I think diminishes the importance of Ralph Ellison.

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3/28/2008

## Locating the Book Review Section: Dallas

*In response to Scott McLemee's Wednesday post, NBCC member Jerome Weeks aka BookDaddy sent this report on the changes in the book pages of the Dallas Morning News during his time there:*

Ten years ago, the Dallas Morning News' book pages were in the back of the week-in-review editorial section (now called "Points"). I always thought we seemed odd there, partly because, as the book columnist, I was on the arts staff, and my author interviews and publishing industry stories appeared in the arts pages. Yet on Sunday, I was permitted to put on my church clothes and sit in the back of the bus behind all of the paper's Big Brain Conservative Solons and Earnest Chin-Scratchers pondering the well-being of humanity and the fortunes of the Republic. I frequently felt like the idiot comic relief, cap-and-bells, joy buzzer, irreverent seltzer spray and all.

What's more, because there was relatively little coordination between the two departments, I often wondered what might happen when one of the paper's Sabbath gas bags (to borrow Calvin Trillin's phrase) would opine favorably on an Important Volume of Political Lore, and in the back pages, I'd hoot at such drivel. Actually, in the course of writing about various books, I often did take shots, in general, at the editors' deeply held faith in free market cure-alls. Nothing much happened, although my departure from the paper 18 months did get a few cheers from local conservative bloggers. Being appreciated and understood is always touching for a critic.

Four years ago, the News' sections were re-jiggered and the arts pages were beefed up. In a newspaper, how and why certain pages and sections appear where they do, when they do, can be a fiendishly complicated and costly matter involving computerized press run capacity. At any rate, the book pages made the long trek to the back of the Sunday arts section, a prison break I'd advocated for years.

But I soon discovered a serious downside: For many people, the arts

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section is a garish ghetto, something to be avoided or zipped through only for salacious Britney bits (thus confirming their opinion of cultural coverage as light entertainment at best, cheap shilling at worst). I had joined my peers in the culture trade -- in there with *The Celebrity Apprentice* and *The Hills Have Eyes, Part II*. When I was with the editorial columnists, even though it seemed I was waving from the back row of the senior class, many readers felt this treated books in the Wood-Paneled Manner they deserve, especially if we kept writing about, sigh, political non-fiction and presidential biographies. Call it the Sam Tanenhaus Halo Effect, but it's an age-old American attitude: Fiction is suspect; non-fiction is useful, educational, improving. Over the years, I even met a number of readers who asked me what had happened to me -- they'd always read my column and then it had disappeared.

Soooo ... there's something to be said for either placement. In *Newspaper World* -- where hard news and political insider baseball are considered the highest forms of thought -- putting the book pages with the Big Boys means they're being taken seriously, more or less. Keeping books with my fellow clowns and courtesans in cultural coverage, on the other hand, means we can speak to our people directly, comfortably, without having to do the high school principal act ("Read this, it's good for you"). But it can also mean, in the eyes of many, that we've been trivialized. Of course, the logical solution -- a separate Sunday book section -- now mostly belongs to history.--Jerome Weeks

Labels: [Book Reviewing](#), [Guest Posts](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY JANE CIABATTARI 10:04:00 AM



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## Every Effort Helps



An email message sent to the listserv of the Association of American University Presses by its current president, Sanford G. Thatcher, encourages AAUP members to contact newspaper editors to try to persuade them to publish reviews by local writers, rather than just using syndicated material.

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The AAUP (which, as the result of an unfortunate crisis in the acronym-manufacturing industry some years ago, must constantly remind people that it is not the same organization as the American Association of University Professors) represents [125 presses in the United States and abroad](#). The days when academic books were marketed primarily to academic libraries are long since over. Between the corporate consolidation of trade publishing and the never-ending budget pressures on scholarly presses over the past decade or so, the catalogs of AAUP members now often include numerous titles meant for the general public.

In short, the university-press world now has good reason to pay attention to how newspapers cover books, or don't. In his note to AAUPers, Thatcher, who is also director of Penn State University Press, has taken the initiative by encouraging his colleagues to write for the *Centre Daily Times*.

Here is the main part of Thatcher's message, quoted by permission:

At a seminar at Penn State last November on journalism and the future of the arts, I was on a panel to talk about book reviewing, and the editor of the CDT was on the panel also. His presentation illuminated the many financial pressures under which newspapers are operating today which have led them to eliminate staff to which the

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today, which have led them to eliminate staff to which the job of being book review editor could be assigned. We talked afterward, and out of this grew the idea of having book reviews contributed by members of the local community rather than relying on reviews from syndicates written by people located elsewhere. One book reviewed recently, for example, concerned how local public libraries are faring these days, and it would have made perfect sense to have this reviewed by a local librarian; instead, the CDT picked up a review written by someone from Texas!

I am starting off as the coordinator. The CDT has given us a limit of 600 words for a review, but in addition it will print a scan of the book cover if we can provide it. My review of Jacob Hacker's book, *The Great Risk Shift*, published by Oxford University Press in 2006 and released in an expanded and updated edition in paperback in December 2007, was printed in today's paper.

Accompanying the review in a sidebar (which doesn't show up online) is this message headlined "Be a Reviewer": "If you are interested in writing a review of a recently published book, fiction or nonfiction, that you think members of our local community would appreciate knowing about, please send a brief note to Sanford G. Thatcher, Director, Penn State University Press, at [sgt3@psu.edu](mailto:sgt3@psu.edu). Include the title, author, and a brief description of the book and tell why you would like to review it for the Centre Daily Times."

We already have a second review lined up of a new novel by Brandeis professor of literature Edward Engelberg about a scandal involving a university professor in a college town. Our retired humanities editor, Philip Winsor, is writing this review. Our Sales & Marketing Director, Tony Sanfilippo, has recently agreed to write a review of Yale's new book by Jonathan Zittrain titled *The Future of the Internet--And How To Stop It*. I also recently asked Chicago to send me its new book about Richard Rorty, which I plan to review myself (having been both a former student and the editor of his best known book). I have approached a number of faculty on campus, like Michael Berube, to help with this effort.

It seems to me that there is likely to be no better market for the general-interest titles that we all publish from

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'06 Archive

[Why Do Critics Ignore Certain](#)

time to time than the college towns in which many of our presses are located, and if we all were to organize ourselves in such a fashion as to help our local newspapers run reviews of these books written by people in our own communities, we can thereby help offset at least some of the damage done by the disappearance of reviews from the major city dailies. Naturally, I have an interest in this idea's catching on elsewhere because I feel a conflict of interest in having any of our Penn State Press books reviewed by the CDT, at least while I'm serving as coordinator. So I hope some of you will piggyback on our effort and get in touch with your own local paper's editor to see if there might be interest in creating such a "user-generated" book review operation in your community. Our CDT editor is really keen about this initiative, and I wouldn't be surprised if editors elsewhere would echo that sentiment.

Not coincidentally, the theme of my address as departing AAUP president in June will be self-help as a strategy for university presses!

For the record, it's worth mentioning that former NBCC president John Freeman urged academics to take just this sort of initiative [last year](#).

Another encouraging sign has been the decision by *The Austin-American Statesman* to devote a regular column by Roger Gathman, a local critic, to [recent books from academic presses](#).

Labels: [Industry News](#), [NBCC Campaign to Save Book Reviews](#)

POSTED BY SCOTT MCLEEMEE 10:50:00 AM



### **2 COMMENTS:**

 Robert said...

Is Sandford G. Thatcher of Penn State Press expressing enlightenment or enlightened self-interest when he arranges book reviews by his employees to run in the Centre Daily Times? Several issues: Does the Daily Times editor -- it has no full time book editor -- select the titles or is that up to Mr. Thatcher and crew?

He makes no mention if the modest Daily Times pays the Penn State Press workers for these reviews and if so, how much? It's one thing to express concern about the state of newspaper book reviewing, but it's very much another thing to assume control of book choice and content for a small daily that provides no resources for book coverage except space for a small 600 words or 12-inch review that would otherwise go to listing

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[This or maybe this.](#)

[The Best Way to Respond to a Bad](#)

[Review](#)

[Don't Know Much About](#)

[Counterinsurgency](#)

## **The Critical I: Conversations With Critics and Review Editors**

[Lev Grossman, Book Critic, Time Magazine](#)

[Mark Rotella, Review Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

[Steve Weinberg, Critic, Author, Investigative Reporter](#)

[Karen Long, Book Editor, Cleveland Plain Dealer](#)

[M.A. Orthofer, Complete Review Founder](#)

[Sarah T. "Sally" Williams, Book Editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune](#)

[Chauncey Mabe, Book Editor, South Florida Sun Sentinel](#)

[Jerome Weeks, Dallas Morning News Staff Critic](#)

[Tom Walker, Book Editor, Denver Post](#)

[Marcela Valdes, Washington Post Book Notes Columnist](#)

[Fritz Lanham, Book Editor, Houston Chronicle](#)

[Oscar Villalon, Book Editor, San Francisco Chronicle](#)

[Sybil Steinberg, Contributing Editor, Publishers Weekly](#)

[church spaghetti suppers in Tyrone and Port Matilda, Pa.](#)

[Bob Hoover, book editor, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)

12:43 PM

 [Scott McLemee](#) said...

I spent a while trying to figure out just how much of Thatcher's self-interest might be served by having his marketing director review a book from a completely different university press.

Rather than keep dwelling in the imponderable, though, I decided to point this comment out to Thatcher.

He sent this reply and asked that I post it:

"Bob, just to reassure you, this is not an activity restricted to Penn State Press employees. Accompanying the very first review (which I wrote about Oxford's book by Jacob Hacker) was a note inviting members of the community to send me an e-mail about any book they'd like to review. Although the next review will be by a former Press employee and I have commissioned a review by a current Press employee, I expect that the vast majority of reviews will be contributed by people not connected in any way with the Press, and in fact I have directly written to a number of people in town and on campus to solicit their involvement as potential reviewers. It will be up to them to choose which books they want to review; occasionally I may approach someone about reviewing a particular new book if I think it would be of interest to the community at large, but mostly my role will be confined to editing their submissions. There is no pay for any review, nor am I paid anything by the CDT for my work. The CDT is having one of its senior staff members serve as the main contact with me. As long as I am coordinating this effort, of course, no books published by our Press can be reviewed. That is why I am interested in exporting this idea to other parts of the country, so that some of our books might get reviewed elsewhere in the country. That is the extent of the Press's self-interest in this project. We gain nothing from it locally."

12:38 PM

[POST A COMMENT](#)

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[Local Focus through Community Newspaper Book Reviews](#)

[End of the Semester Blues?](#)

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## **NBCC Honored by Association of American Publishers**

by NBCC | Mar-05-2008

“Publishers used to worry about getting a bad review. Now publishers worry about not getting any review at all,” Hyperion publisher Bob Miller noted as he presented the 2008 AAP Honors award to the National Book Critics Circle, with president John Freeman accepting on behalf of the NBCC. AAP president Pat Schroeder had noted earlier, “Since its founding more than three decades ago, the NBCC has played a central role in this country’s literary dialogue, but never has its voice been stronger or more urgently needed.”

Here are NBCC President John Freeman’s comments:

“It’s a treat for us to accept an award that was previously given to National Public Radio and Brian Lamb and Oprah Winfrey. (I know this is my moment to tell all the guests to look under their seats for keys to a new car, but I’m afraid to tell you...). You guys know where the cab stand is....

Thanks also (and especially) to Pat Schroeder and Tina Jordan, who have been instrumental in building a bridge between you, the publishers, and us, the critics.

In truth, this moment has been a long time coming. We have much in common, after all:

(The obvious thing being that people need to read to enjoy what we do.)

We also face similar pressures. Both publishing and book sections have groaned under the expectations of consolidated media.

Both of us face a reader with more choices than ever about how to entertain themselves.

And both of us have a history of crying wolf.

That’s right, if you listen to book critics or publishers over time, the end has always been nigh.

It is a quiver in both our arrows: for publishers, it allows you to say this new title is what can to turn things around.

For the critic, this posture allows us to be the cynic in your ear. The one, as Susan Sontag once joked, "to stick around, just to see how bad things will get."

And in truth: there’s been enough bad news:

-a reading report from the NEA that shows we're doing a terrible job at keep young adults hooked on reading

-deep cutbacks in book sections around the country

—a climate of electronic frenzy. We work all the time, now, because technology allows us to.

But there is, buried in these details, an opportunity – one that has something to do with new media, and everything to do with the inherent pleasures of reading:

Literary culture can reach more people than ever before.

I'm not going to get all Pollyanna and start talking about a paperless future, how books will fly around by jetpacks and clean you're apartment and spitshine your shoes.

Although perhaps the Kindle will one day do all these things.

What I mean is—we now live in an age when a guy in Saskatchewan can wake up in his jammies, stumble over the dead moose in his living room, and order himself a copy of a chapbook of poems and have it there in two days if he likes.

Or download it as an e-book.

Or google himself up some reviews of it, just to whet his appetite.

And that's what reviews do – in Edmund Wilson's phrase, they make you readier for the reading.

Thanks, partly to the internet, there are fewer boundaries to readerly pleasure than ever before: a savvy reader can read dozens of newspaper book sections around the globe in English.

They can hear authors read, receive emails when their favorite one comes to town, they can watch youtube clips of them at events.

They can even get their books signed at an event in New York when that author is in, you guessed it, Saskatchewan.

But what happens when our cultural landscape is structured only to reward (and encourage) those who are already pretty darn ready to read?

This fundamental worry – this crucial issue – is what has guided the NBCC in the past two years.

It is why, much as online book sections deliver so many nifty features, we were so vociferous about the print cutbacks which leaped forward last year.

So we decided enough is enough – it doesn't have to be this way (in part, because much as they whine, some of these newspapers are making plenty of money)

So we expanded the circle to include the people already in it. We invited our former finalists and winners, critics, booksellers, and a few publishers to chip in on campaign to save book reviews.

We posted over 100 essays and interviews on our blog in two months about this issue.

I flew down to Atlanta to take part in a protest in front of the offices of the Atlanta Journal Constitution, who had essentially fired their book editor.

I talked to people passing by on the street, and they liked the book section just fine.

We staged over a dozen panels in five states discussing the ramifications of what happens when one form of getting news – whatever they say, over 115 million people still get their fingers inky from a newspaper every Sunday – begins to let go of its commitment to treating books as news.

But complaining isn't enough, protesting isn't enough. Wagging fingers, isn't enough.

We realize unless you add something to the culture – you're simply fighting a losing battle with that horrible phrase, 'market trends.'

So the NBCC has become much more than a prize-giving organization, solely concerned with criticism and critical practices.

In my opinion, it has to be – there are more prizes than ever.

Our website and blog, Critical Mass, became, essentially a book supplement, running interviews, essays – on our former finalists and winners – drawing on the expertise of critics, from J.M. Coetzee to Doris Lessing to John Updike – to tell our readers what works of criticism to read.

We set up nearly 50 events over the course of last year.

Nearly 20 of them involved our bestseller list – the NBCC's Good Reads, which funneled the recommendations of nearly 600 critics and former finalists and winners of our book prize into a top five list.

This past month, we had discussions in Sacramento and Seattle, Portland and Philadelphia –

And we did all of this with volunteers, and our membership dues.

Think what we could do with a little money?

It is in this enormously helpful spirit that the AAP has presented us with this award, and the chance to accept it ourselves.

There are those who say we shouldn't be there. That what we should only be evaluating, and judging, parsing and handing down edicts.

But since when has reading worked that way?

Writers, the great writers, coax us into a story, challenge us, woo us, seduce us. This is also the job of book critics.

We live in a talk-back culture now, for better or worse, and rather than climb higher up into our garret, the critic – more than ever – needs to be on the street.

The critic needs to be in touch with the reader.

This award from the AAP means a lot to the NBCC. It will make it that much easier for this big, sometimes amorphous organization to keep our one ear to the ground, the other to our own hearts, so we can tell the people we all care about