

suggested what the paper was going to do to prevent future occurrences, according to Bugeja and Peterson, director and associate director, respectively, of the journalism school at Iowa State. A 1986 study found many of the same problems.

Shafer writes that Scott R. Maier, who teaches journalism at the University of Oregon, sent accuracy questionnaires to major sources noted in 3,600 articles in newspapers including *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Mercury News* of San Jose, and *The Tallahassee Democrat*. Roughly 70 percent of the recipients completed the survey. They spotted 2,615 fac-

If newspapers confessed to every error they made, they would have to devote 50 times more space each day to corrections.

tual errors in the stories for which they served as sources. No paper corrected more than 4.2 percent of its flawed articles. Maier reports that when 130 of the sources he queried asked for corrections, only four were published.

Even if some of the errors were relatively minor, such as a wrong age or title, or were out of the newspaper's control (such as faulty information from sources other than those evaluating the facts), the results are shocking to even the "most jaded" of newspaper readers, Shafer writes. And worse than the papers' sloppiness is the cover-up they perpetrate on a daily basis.

PRESS & MEDIA

Penny Wise, Culturally Foolish

THE SOURCE: "Goodbye to All That" by Steve Wasserman, in *Columbia Journalism Review*, Sept.–Oct. 2007.

LIKE MEMBERS OF A NEARLY extinct species, newspaper book review sections and features are dying at an accelerating rate, and the survivors are increasingly feeble. *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the North Carolina Research Triangle *News and Observer*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, among others, have cut staff or coverage or pages. Several newspapers have grafted the stump of book coverage onto sections that list upcoming events for readers with interests as divergent as auto racing and celebrity cooking.

The sorry plight of book reviews is only a chapter in the larger story of cultural and technological change affecting the printed word. Newspapers are in crisis, trying to adapt to the new digital technologies sucking away advertising revenue and readers. The bookselling industry is roiling from consolidation and digitization. Most troubling, however, writes Steve Wasserman, the former editor of *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, is the "sea change in the culture of literacy itself." A speeding and visually dazzling world makes serious reading increasingly irrelevant. The habits of attention indispen-

sable for absorbing long-form narrative and sustained argument have been eroded.

Newspapers have tried to adjust to the new taste for the short, "bright" item, and many book reviews consequently have become mere pabulum, almost deserving of their fate, Wasserman writes. When Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma* was newly and brilliantly translated several years ago, Wasserman commissioned a long review from Princeton's Edmund White and splashed it prominently in the Sunday book section. His editor motioned him into his office the next morning. "Steve," he said wearily, "Stendhal? Another dead, white, European male?"

Serious reading has always been a minority enterprise, but in 2004, for the first time, a majority of Americans said that they had not read a novel, play, or poem in the past year. That nevertheless leaves a lot of people. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that in 2002 nearly 100 million people read literature of some type.

Even so, newspaper book review sections generally, perhaps universally, lose money. So if they don't bring in profits, and are generally "shockingly mediocre," according to Wasserman, why not consign them to a merciful death? He concludes that readers know in their bones something newspapers forget at their peril: "Without books, indeed, without the news of such books—without literacy—the good society vanishes and barbarism triumphs."