SUPER SEARCHERS IN THE NEWS: THE ONLINE SECRETS OF JOURNALISTS
By Paula J. Hane.
Edited by Reva Basch
Cyberage Books, 260 pp., 2000

Today’s newsroom is a wired world. The World Wide Web is now the journalist’s first source for facts, ranging from how a media institute spells its name to when Sherlock Holmes first appeared in print. The electronic archive, accessed using a Web browser through an internal network, has replaced the reference room and its cabinets full of musty clippings.

The title of this book suggests that this wired world can be a mystery housed in a labyrinth, frustrating journalists with its impenetrability or swallowing them into a maze of unruly URLs and blind-alley links. The author promises deliverance from this bewilderment by arming journalists with “hard-won tips, techniques and strategies for using the Internet and online services to get the scoop, check the facts and nail the story.”

Unfortunately, this book falls well short of that promise.

The book consists of 10 interviews with news librarians and others involved in news research, such as a “hard-hitting investigative reporter and Webmaster,” a “reporter, new media professor and Internet guru,” and “PCMike, the high-tech newshound.”

The sources interviewed are well qualified as Web sleuths. The first is Nora Paul, formerly of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and now the director of the Institute for New Media Studies at the University of Minnesota. Paul has written widely about using the Internet and about computer-assisted reporting and has co-authored a book on the subject with Margot Williams of the Washington Post, who also was interviewed for this book.

Others such as Liz Donovan, a researcher at the Washington Post during the Watergate era and now the research editor at the Miami Herald, have earned through hard work the right to be called “super searchers.”

The book fails to deliver for two reasons: First, the question-answer approach, in the style of Interview magazine, requires the reader to wade through a lot of words for a little information. Personal reminiscence and anecdote get in the way of news you can use.

Second, the information itself offers limited insight into searching the Web. The author sorts out maybe a half-dozen tips per chapter. Many are simplistic, such as: If a Web page doesn’t load in 10 seconds, move on. Some tips contradict others. One researcher says he organizes his bookmarks by category and carries them on a floppy disc at all times. Another says her bookmarks are so out of hand, she doesn’t look at them anymore. Instead, she just uses Yahoo! or Google to start a search.

Perhaps that’s the most surprising tip, that proletariat search engines such as Yahoo! and Alta Vista are often the tools of choice for these “professional news researchers.” But again, that’s hardly what most of us would call an “online secret.”

For those seeking detailed instruction on how to search the Web, try out two sites Nora Paul left behind at the Poynter Institute: http://www.poynter.org/research/nr.htm for help with news research, and http://poynter.org/research/car.htm for computer assisted reporting.

These sites also will tell you that “Poynter” is spelled with a “Y.” Go to http://www.Sherlockian.net to discover that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his 1887 novel, “A Study in Scarlet,” first mentions Sherlock Holmes, a super searcher of a different era.

—Michael O’Donnell is an assistant professor of new media at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul.

INSIDE PASSAGE: A JOURNEY BEYOND BORDERS
By Richard Manning
Island Press, 203 pp., 2000

I need to disclose up front that I have known Richard Manning several years through SEJ. For years, he’s attended our national conference, no matter what. And so he won my admiration.

I came to know him as a writer a number of years ago through “Grassland: The History, Biology, Politics and Promise of the American Prairie,” (Paperback—July 1997) his ecological paean to the prairie that begins about where I live, in Missouri, and ends up near his home, in Montana.

Having read “Grassland,” I quickly stepped back in his career to read “Last Stand: A Riveting Exposé of Environmental Pillage and a Lone Journalist’s Struggle to Keep Faith” (Paperback—November 1992), and marveled at the courage of this writer who was driven from daily journalism by editors or influence-wielding big corporations (depending on whose version sits best with you). It wasn’t just that I admired the stand he took that ended up in his departure from the newspaper world, but what he turned that into—a satisfying little book.

In many ways, I was glad I had come to know Manning this way when I had finished “Inside Passage: A Journey Beyond Borders,” Manning’s most recent book. In many ways, it tackles and ties up the problems that have plagued or informed his journalistic career, the perceived clash of people peering only through economic lenses at nature. To me, it’s the bookend