There is no place to hide from political journalist Mark Leibovich in our Nation’s Capital, no rock that he will leave unturned, and no line that he will not cross. Or at least that is how it seems in This Town, his lengthy denigration of anyone and everyone to have been associated with the power-hungry, ladder-climbing subculture of Washington, DC, elitists. “The club,” as he calls it, “Suck Up City,” and most prominently, “This Town,” is the community of political, business, and media members who populate DC’s inner circle. Everyone from newsroom spinsters, to congressional aides, party promoters, and the Commander-in-Chief himself are all members of “the club” and are all picked apart by Leibovich, whose intent with This Town is to reveal the vanity, social incest, and financial motivation that has consumed our governing city. Leibovich spares very few during this collection of stories and anecdotes from his past twenty years as DC-based journalist, and possibly makes even fewer friends with the publication of this work.

The timeframe of the book is brief relative to Washington, DC’s history, spanning from the death of famed TV personality Tim Russert in 2008 to Barack Obama’s second inauguration in 2012, but Leibovich explains that “this town” or “the club” first came to be well before these events. What he describes seems almost like a perfect storm of events and developments that ultimately turned Washington into the glamorized and pretentious community that he then shreds apart. Leibovich describes how Watergate making “journalists a celebrated class,” (101) “the cable news boom of the 1990’s,” (101) “the arrival of Big Money and politics as an industry,” (99) and “the orgy of new media” (16) in the 2000’s, all helped create the “rolling carnival of political moneymaking and celebrity [that] has only exacerbated This
Town’s default vanity.” (17) Interspersed within these developments, though, are the countless individuals whom he cites as the heart of what is wrong with our nation’s capital.

There is no universal model of what a member of “the club” is like, rather, the only thing they seem to share is Leibovich’s mockery. There is the unglamorous Senator Harry Reid who cares nothing of the DC limelight and “could… pass for an oddball taxidermist who keeps a closet full of stuffed pigeons.” (71) There is Kurt Badella, the overachieving and zealous press secretary of Representative Darrell Issa, who “activates your radar and not in a good way” (174) and seems like “a kid dressing up like a grown-up,” (174) “trying to stick at the grown-up table.” (175) There is Tammy Haddad, or “the Tamster,” a bubbly and exacerbating “professional party host… and full-service convener of the Washington A-list,” (32) who Leibovich frequently spotlights as perpetuating DC’s pompous culture of power networking and schmoozing. Even President Obama is called out for his pretentious iterations of being a “true public servant,” (41) and his “zealous efforts to show how unzealous [he] was about climbing the ladder.” (41) Seemingly, the only person Leibovich leaves untouched is the beloved Tim Russert, whose funeral marked a pinnacle of sorts for the hollow DC elite. The “speeches and tributes and telegenic choke-ups were never… about [Tim]” Leibovich states, but the “people left behind to scrape their way up the pecking order in his absence.” (24) It is as if he, Leibovich, has a personal vendetta to prove how no motives in DC are genuine or sincere.

The only thing that is possibly more overwhelming than Leibovich’s disdain for Washington, DC and “the club” is his use of humor and sarcasm to drive home his points. He frequently uses side notes and excessive exclamation to accent the ridiculousness of those whom he mocks. While the reader cannot help but laugh at many of his quips and jabs, like stating that Senator Reid is “endowed with all the magnetism of a dried snail,” (69) his frequent facetious remarks almost works to discredit his professionalism. His aggressive criticism may make the reader question how valid his ridicule is or if he is just an ornery journalist who has spent too many years within the same city. Either way, This Town makes it clear that he has some clear animosity towards much of our Nation’s Capital and those who control our country.