



Why Am I Reading This? Theme Information

The year 2016 marks the 100th awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes. This theme collects some of the winners of the Pulitzer Prize, the country's most prestigious awards and the most sought-after accolades in journalism, letters, and music.

Book List

All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr

Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

Empire Falls by Richard Russo

Growing Up by Russell Baker

Honey in the Horn by H.L. Davis

March by Geraldine Brooks

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard

The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

Theme Essay – History of The Pulitzer Prizes

By Seymour Topping with additional editing by Sig Gissler (from www.pulitzer.org)

In the latter years of the 19th century, Joseph Pulitzer stood out as the very embodiment of American journalism. Hungarian-born, an intense indomitable figure, Pulitzer was the most skillful of newspaper publishers, a passionate crusader against dishonest government, a fierce, hawk-like competitor who did not shrink from sensationalism in circulation struggles, and a visionary who richly endowed his profession.

His innovative New York World and St. Louis Post–Dispatch reshaped newspaper journalism. Pulitzer was the first to call for the training of journalists at the university level in a school of journalism. And certainly, the lasting influence of the Pulitzer Prizes on journalism, literature, music, and drama is to be attributed to his visionary acumen.

Pulitzer's Flexible Will

In writing his 1904 will, which made provision for the establishment of the Pulitzer Prizes as an incentive to excellence, Pulitzer specified solely four awards in journalism, four in letters and drama, one for education, and four traveling scholarships. In letters, prizes were to go to an American novel, an original American play performed in New York, a book on the history of the United States, an American biography, and a history of public service by the press.

But, sensitive to the dynamic progression of his society, Pulitzer made provision for broad changes in the system of awards. He established an overseer advisory board and willed it "power in its discretion to suspend or to change any subject or subjects, substituting, however, others in their places, if in the judgment of the board such suspension, changes, or substitutions shall be conducive to the public good or rendered advisable by public necessities, or by reason of change of time." He also empowered the board to withhold any award where entries fell below its standards of excellence. The assignment of power to the board was such that it could also overrule the recommendations for awards made by the juries subsequently set up in each of the categories.

Thus, the Plan of Award, which has governed the prizes since their inception in 1917, has been revised frequently. The Board, later renamed the Pulitzer Prize Board, has increased the number of awards to 21 and introduced poetry, music, and photography as subjects, while adhering to the spirit of the founder's will and its intent.

Award changes beginning in 1997

The board typically exercised its broad discretion in 1997, the 150th anniversary of Pulitzer's birth, in two fundamental respects. It took a significant step in recognition of the growing importance of work being done by newspapers in online journalism. Beginning with the 1999 competition, the board sanctioned the submission by newspapers of online presentations as supplements to print exhibits in the Public Service category. The board left open the distinct possibility of further inclusions in the Pulitzer process of online journalism as the electronic medium developed. Thus, with the 2006 competition, the Board allowed online content in all 14 of its journalism categories. For 2009, the competition was expanded to include online–only news organizations. For 2011, the Plan

of Award was revised to encourage more explicitly the entry of online and multimedia material, with the board seeking to honor the best work in whatever form is the most effective. And for 2012, the board adopted an all-digital entry and judging system, replacing the historic reliance on submission of scrapbooks.

The other major change was in music, a category that was added to the Plan of Award for prizes in 1943. The prize always had gone to composers of classical music. The definition and entry requirements of the music category beginning with the 1998 competition were broadened to attract a wider range of American music. In an indication of the trend toward bringing mainstream music into the Pulitzer process, the 1997 prize went to Wynton Marsalis's "Blood on the Fields," which has strong jazz elements, the first such award.

Announcements

The formal announcement of the prizes, made each April, states that the awards are made by the president of Columbia University on the recommendation of the Pulitzer Prize board. This formulation is derived from the Pulitzer will, which established Columbia as the seat of the administration of the prizes. Today, in fact, the independent board makes all the decisions relative to the prizes. In his will Pulitzer bestowed an endowment on Columbia of \$2,000,000 for the establishment of a School of Journalism, one-fourth of which was to be "applied to prizes or scholarships for the encouragement of public service, public morals, American literature, and the advancement of education."

In doing so, he stated: "I am deeply interested in the progress and elevation of journalism, having spent my life in that profession, regarding it as a noble profession and one of unequalled importance for its influence upon the minds and morals of the people. I desire to assist in attracting to this profession young men of character and ability, also to help those already engaged in the profession to acquire the highest moral and intellectual training." In his ascent to the summit of American journalism, Pulitzer himself received little or no assistance. He prided himself on being a self-made man, but it may have been his struggles as a young journalist that imbued him with the desire to foster professional training.

The Medal--Pulitzer's Gold

The iconic Pulitzer Prize Gold Medal is awarded each year to the American news organization that wins the Public Service category. It is never awarded to an individual.



However, through the years, the Medal has come to symbolize the entire Pulitzer program.

In 1918, a year after the Prizes began, the medal was designed by sculptor Daniel Chester French and his associate Henry Augustus Lukeman. French later gained fame for his seated Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington. One side of the medal displays the profile of Benjamin Franklin, apparently based on the bust by French sculptor Jean-Antoine Houdon. Decorating the other side is a husky, bare-chested printer at work, his shirt draped across the end of a press. Surrounding the printer are the words: "For disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by an American newspaper during the year...."

The name of the winning news organization is inscribed on the Franklin side of the medal. The year of the award is memorialized on the other side.

The medal, about two and three-quarter inches in diameter and a quarter-inch thick, is not solid gold. It is silver with 24-carat gold plate and presented to the winning newspaper in an elegant cherry-wood box with brass hardware.