

Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism

By Roy J. Harris Jr.

Columbia and London: University of
Missouri Press, 2007, 473 pp.

*Reviewed by Tamara Baldwin
Southeast Missouri State University*

By focusing attention on the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service in his book, *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*, Roy J. Harris Jr. offers readers—whether he intended to or not—some of the most compelling evidence of why the nation needs its newspapers, a timely reminder in a decade when newspapers around the country are making news not for their content, but for their efforts to sustain themselves in times of economic uncertainty.

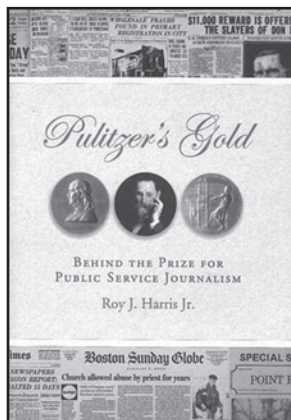
Pulitzer's Gold focuses on telling the story behind the finalists and winners of the Public Service category of the Pulitzer Prize, a category which Joseph Pulitzer II, chairman of the board that awarded the Pulitzers from 1950-55, called the most important of the prizes: “I

think I am safe in saying that the members of the Board...consider the gold medal for public service as easily the most important prize of the year. I feel certain that they share my belief that my father so regarded it. Journalistic public service was my father's passion” (p. 30).

In this work, the author has spotlighted the stories behind a number of the winners

in the public service category from 1918, when the first Pulitzer in this category was awarded, through 2007 when the book went to print. As part of his research, Harris conducted interviews, when possible, with newspaper personnel who were part of the coverage under consideration for the prize. In addition, he interviewed members of the Pulitzer Prize jury who had the difficult task of deciding the winner of the prize from among the nominees. One of the most illuminating

aspects of this approach is the insight provided by the details that allow readers glimpses of what the prize jurors considered important and the issues they had weighed and considered in reaching their final and often agonizing decisions about the awards.



Some of the most interesting stories in the book offer details about the earliest winners of this category, including the 1921 Public Service prize awarded to the *Boston Post* for its coverage of activities and eventual arrest of Charles Ponzi (after whom the Ponzi scheme was subsequently named) and the 1922 prize to the *New York World* for coverage concerning activities of the Ku Klux Klan. In Chapter 10, the author includes details about the Public Service awards the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* received in 1937, 1941, 1948, 1950 (shared with the *Chicago Daily News*), and 1952. It was out of the author's personal interest in that 1950 Public Service award given for coverage related to 37 Illinois newspapermen being on an Illinois state payroll that this book in fact grew. The author's father, a reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was recognized, along with *Chicago Daily News* reporter George Thiem, in the award citation that year.

More recent winners have entire chapters devoted to them and offer engaging and fascinating accounts of the story behind the stories. These include the 1973 prize awarded to the *Washington Post* for its Watergate case investigation; the 2001 prize awarded to the *Oregonian* for its examination of abuses related to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Services; the 2002 prize awarded to the *New York Times* for its special section devoted to coverage of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the U.S.; the 2003 prize awarded to the *Boston Globe* for its coverage of the cases of sexual abuse by priests that ultimately led to some changes in the Roman

Catholic Church, and the 2006 prize shared by the *Sun-Herald* in Biloxi-Gulfport, Mississippi and the *Times-Picayune* in New Orleans, Louisiana, for their efforts to serve their readers and their communities by keeping them connected and informed in the days following Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Pulitzer's Gold is a compelling and engrossing look at journalism at its best, as confirmed by the awarding of the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service to the newspapers and personnel responsible for the journalism represented in this account. Journalism and mass media historians will find much in this work to enjoy and digest, and students of journalism will find it extremely valuable as they study the craft of journalism and consider what it means to be a journalist in today's world. For all readers, it should reaffirm the value of newspapers in our world. ■