

Review of: *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*.
By Roy J. Harris Jr.
Columbia, University of Missouri Press, 2007. 473 pages.

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Ignorance of U.S. History Shown by College Freshmen

Survey of 7,000 Students in 36 Institutions
Discloses Vast Fund of Misinformation
On Many Basic Facts

--Headline on story that helped the *New York Times* win the Gold Medal for Public Service in 1944.

At the turn of the last century, Joseph Pulitzer, the innovative publisher who did so much to make American journalism more visual, more exciting, and more crusading, was not well. Having been an invalid for years, he was giving thought to his legacy, and having made a vast fortune (almost in spite of himself) in selling news to the poor, laboring, and immigrant classes, he had the means to leave a legacy that could make a difference. Given his long-standing interest in improving the standards and practices of journalism, it is perhaps not surprising that Pulitzer endowed a school of journalism, at Columbia. Drafting his will just a year after the Nobel Prize began to be awarded, Pulitzer also went a step further. In his bequest, he set aside funds to endow the annual prizes in journalism that bear his name. His intention was to professionalize the field and elevate the practice of journalism long after his death. Above all,

he specified that the annual journalism awards should include a Gold Medal to reward “the most disinterested and meritorious public service.”

That is the story that Roy J. Harris Jr. takes up in *Pulitzer’s Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*. As an act of story-telling, this book is a real accomplishment. The author delivers on his promise to tell how teams of reporters and editors (as well as photographers and, increasingly in recent years, graphic specialists) have struggled to win the highest prize. Inspired by his own father’s winning of a Gold Medal at the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* in 1950, Harris recounts crisply and clearly how journalists braved the elements, tailed the bad guys, and comforted the afflicted, decade after decade.

In a single volume, scholars and students can learn about the resources, skills, and (yes, to use an old-fashioned term) character that went into the winning entries. Harris recounts the story of *Canton Daily News* publisher Don Mellett, who was gunned down in an attempt to intimidate his newspaper from investigating local corruption in 1926; we learn about the lawyer who helped the *Point Reyes Light* investigate a cult who found a rattlesnake in his mailbox. In Harris’ version, reporters take great dares, editors back them up, and publishers gladly pay for everything. These tales from the heyday of print journalism, so widely neglected in newsrooms, can still humble and inspire anyone who asks questions for a living.

Harris, a long-time *Wall Street Journal* reporter, begins his long tale with a “hook” – a vignette from the moments before the fury of Hurricane Katrina slammed into the Gulf Coast in 2005. We see some brave and resourceful journalists preparing for the worst, and we are told – in one of the book’s continuing tropes – that “thoughts of winning another Pulitzer Prize were far from anyone’s mind.”

Then, just as the storm breaks, we take a detour back in time – to the founding of the Pulitzer prizes and the striking of the first Gold Medal (depicting a relief of Ben Franklin in profile done by sculptor Daniel Chester French). Harris provides an overview of trends in the awarding of the Gold Medal over the years: small papers are just as eligible as big ones; projects that result in government action or legislative reform are favored; providing a real service to the paper’s community in times of crisis is also esteemed. Then, it’s back to Katrina.

Harris next devotes a full chapter to the mechanics of awarding the prize and the early years. The first advisory board was chaired by Pulitzer’s son, Ralph Pulitzer, the editor of his father’s New York paper, *The World*. The others epitomized the newspaper establishment of the Northeast: editors and publishers of the big papers in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, along with Melville Stone of The Associated Press and two editors from the Midwest. In the early days, members often served for decades, and no one stayed longer than members of Pulitzer’s family – his sons Ralph and Joseph II, followed by grandson Joseph Jr., who took over as chairman in 1955 and hung on until 1986.

Harris then jumps into a detailed telling of how the *Boston Globe* tackled the Catholic Church in exposing dozens and dozens of cases of sexual abuse of boys and girls by Catholic priests and the ensuing cover-up by the church hierarchy. Eventually, a team of four reporters (plus editors) produced some 900 articles that resulted in indictments, reforms, and the 2003 Gold Medal.

But in the midst of the Boston story, Harris cross-cuts to the 2002 winner, the *New York Times*, which won the Public Service medal for its epic coverage of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Using published accounts, memoirs by the key figures, and interviews, Harris shows a superb news organization working at its peak of seriousness. His account underscores the value for the public, when all hell breaks loose, in having veteran reporters and editors who are used to working together, an essentially unlimited budget, and clear, high standards. Implicit in his telling of the tale is the message that if institutions like the *Times* crumble because the

Internet drains away all their resources, much will be lost.

Harris then adds a chapter on the 2004 Gold Medal, which went to the team led by David Barstow and Lowell Bergman at the *New York Times* exposing how many American workers are killed on the job, and the 2005 prize, which went to the *Los Angeles Times* (where Harris worked before he went to the *Journal*) for its coverage of excessive deaths at a ghetto hospital. In Part Two, Harris jumps back in time again and takes up the tale at the beginning, with the first Gold Medal – awarded to the *New York Times* in 1918 for its coverage during the previous year of the Great War in Europe. Then the story unfolds in an essentially chronological fashion from the 1920s through the 1960s, hitting high points along the way, including the Ponzi scheme in 1921. Harris underscores the courage of some early winners in tackling domestic terrorism in the form of the KKK, and he does not shy away from controversy. In the first few decades, the Pulitzer Prizes (including the Gold Medal) were criticized because they often amounted to prizes *for* Pulitzers, as so many Gold Medals went in the early years to the family's newspapers in New York City or St. Louis.

In the early decades, as Harris shows, venality in government or business was a hardy perennial topic, and many a Gold Medal was won for pulling up the noxious weeds of corruption. A more recent recurring theme is the newspaper's role in coping with natural disasters, beginning with Miami in 1993 (hurricane), and continuing through Grand Forks in 1998 (flood), and New Orleans in 2006 (hurricane again, compounded by broken levees). Harris also tracks the rise of reporting on environmental threats that emerged in the 1970s. The book gathers fresh momentum in Part Three with chapters devoted to some classic episodes that culminated in the Gold Medal: the Pentagon Papers (*New York Times*, 1972) and Watergate (*Washington Post*, 1973.) Little new information is revealed (and Harris should have consulted the superb study of the Pentagon Papers by David Rudenstine, *The Day the Presses Stopped*), but these classic tales are re-told with verve and conviction. Harris then presents a grab-bag of winners through the 1980s and 1990s, including some terrific tales of smaller papers rising to the challenge. Tucked into chapter 17 is an important discussion of some overdue reforms that the Pulitzer system went through in the 1970s and 1980s.

Harris, who began working on *Pulitzer's Gold* in mid-2002, writes that as he approached the finish line in 2007, the last stages "at times felt like a race against the unraveling of the very American newspaper business that had produced all this great journalism." Still, he finds encouragement in the last prize covered in his book, the 2007 Gold Medal, which went to the *Wall Street Journal* for its coverage of the backdating of stock options for corporate executives. The book includes a helpful appendix that provides an annotated listing of every Pulitzer Prize winner (in all the *journalism* categories) as well as detailed endnotes and a brief bibliography. Clear and engaging, *Pulitzer's Gold* will be an informative book for the many journalists who do not know the history of the field. While scholars and experts will find little that is new, many students of journalism will find the book to be a source of inspiration and material for term papers.

For all its virtues, Harris' book could have been even better.

It's not the story of every Pulitzer Prize; it focuses on the Public Service medal and has little to say about the other journalism prizes and nothing to say about the Pulitzer Prizes awarded for books and the arts. And it is not the story of every Public Service prize ever awarded. Between the first one and the time of his publication, the Pulitzer board had awarded 92 Gold Medals. Harris looks at the dozen awarded between the mid-1990s and 2005 in some detail. Several dozen others are examined at varying depths of field, and quite a few are simply passed over – all without a good argument by the author for a principle of selection.

In terms of structure, the book follows an approach that is understandable but comes with a

cost. The looping timetable is sometimes confusing, and it deprives Harris of the chance to keep a steady focus on how the prize and the practice of journalism co-evolved over the last century. Did the prizes awarded in the 1920s influence the journalism of the 1930s? Did the journalism of the 1970s influence the kind of efforts that won prizes in the 1980s? Harris does not attempt to trace lines of influence.

In terms of research, Harris has done abundant study for his purpose – which is to tell great stories. But in general, he tends to rely on too few sources: a typical treatment of a given year's prize is based on one book (often a memoir) and an interview with one or two of the principals. In some cases, Harris also seems vulnerable to being overly swayed by a few informants (like Tony Marro) who spoke to him at length.

Regrettably, Harris also passes up the opportunity to go deeper in exploring the problems of the prize culture that the Pulitzers drive. He mentions it here and there – noting, for example, that some projects are rushed into print in late November and December, just in order to qualify. At the same time, some projects become stultifying to readers just in order to seem “big” enough to qualify for the big prizes. Journalists deny doing this (and Harris quotes some of them), but it is an uncritical approach that accepts those statements at face value.

At the same time, I believe it must be said that Harris' book is all too typical of the state of this field. It reflects many of the problems that bedevil journalism history. Like many works of journalism history, this book is stronger on the journalism than on the history.

For one thing, it lacks a deep connection to other fields of history. *Pulitzer's Gold* covers nearly a century of American history, yet there are almost no references to the work of professional historians who focus on economics, culture, gender, race, or the many other topics that are touched upon here.

Like many of those who write journalism history, Harris has a background in journalism, not history. He worked for more than 20 years as a reporter at the *Wall Street Journal* before becoming an editor at *CFO* magazine. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees from the Medill School at Northwestern, but he makes no claim to any professional training in history.

Too often, *Pulitzer's Gold* is too admiring of its subjects. The result is that the book becomes a chronicle of good people doing good works. He rarely considers the rivals or runners-up in each year. It could be that some were better than that year's winner, or it could be that the celebration of certain stories had unintended consequences. But Harris is not really concerned with argument. Story is all. Which may be why the book seems to end with a thump; there is no conclusion, so it is difficult to know what Harris thinks about all this. Thus, it would be difficult for a historian to engage, because Harris offers little in the way of historical argument. And for many historians, argument is all.

So, *Pulitzer's Gold* serves well as a story about the past, but it serves less well as history.

[Note: For the sake of full disclosure, I should note that I spent nine years as a correspondent for one of the winners (The Washington Post), and I have the great good fortune to be acquainted with a few of the reporters from other papers who have shared the Gold Medal.]