

Roy J. Harris, *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public Service Journalism*, (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 473 pages, \$39.95 (hardcover)

*Review by Tom Hrach*

It is a difficult time in the newspaper business. Newspapers are shrinking—from the size of the pages to the size of the editorial staffs. There are cut-backs, employee buyouts and hiring freezes. Newsroom employees are asked to work more hours for less pay and fewer benefits. While newspapers are still paying people to report, write and edit the news, citizen journalists are doing it online for free. Newspapers get criticized by the government, the public and even other news media sources. The question for any newspaper news staffer these days is: Why still do it?

The answer is pretty complicated, but for one answer a person can read Roy J. Harris's *Pulitzer's Gold: Behind the Prize for Public-Service Journalism*. The book could serve as a pep talk to journalists considering getting out of the newspaper business, for which no one would blame them based on the previous paragraph.

The book traces the history of the most coveted award in journalism, the Gold Medal for Public Service, which is the top Pulitzer Prize awarded every spring. The award is given annually, not to an individual but rather a newspaper, which makes it an award no individual can claim even though individuals have been recognized in the winning entries. The Gold Medal is awarded for "the most disinterested and meritorious public service rendered by an American newspaper during the year." It is a fairly vague requirement that could encompass a whole lot of different things. Yet, as Harris reveals, the imprecision of the criteria is exactly why the award has taken on such mythic proportions since the first such prize was awarded in 1918.

A newspaper wins the Gold Medal not by chance, a fluke or good timing. Newspapers get the Gold Medal the old fashioned way—hard work and dedication to journalism. The award means a news organization has committed major resources to serving the public, and anyone who has been part of a Gold Medal winning news organization can put up with all the bad news in the newspaper business just by getting close to such an award. It is why reading about the winning entries from news organizations as small as the weekly *Port Reyes* (Calif.) *Light* to as large as *The New York Times* is such an inspiration.

There are no scoundrels, no scandals and in fact very little dirt on the Gold Medal and its winners through the 80 years Harris chronicles the award. While there is mention of the Janet Cooke episode where *The Washington Post* had to return the Pulitzer Prize for feature writing in 1981, readers are reminded there has been no such scandal with the awarding of Gold Medal. Perhaps

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some deserved it more than others, but each winner brought something noble to the award. In fact, Harris's book reveals plenty of top-quality public service journalism that has been nominated and identified as finalists but has never won the award.

The stories are truly inspirational, and the book's major contribution is the spotlight it shines on how dedication to basic reporting mushroomed into major investigations and changes in society. It was an obituary in *The Lufkin (Texas) News* that led reporters at that newspaper to investigate the death of a local Marine who died in basic training. It eventually led to reform in recruiting and training practices in the military and the 1977 Gold Medal. It was a courthouse lawsuit that led *The Boston Post* to investigate the spurious claims of Charles Ponzi whose get-rich-quick scheme defrauded thousands of people. That earned the newspaper the 1921 Gold Medal. *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Gilbert M. Gaul was giving blood when it struck him to do a business feature on what the Red Cross does with blood after it is donated. It led to a major investigation of the how the American blood industry operates with little government regulation or supervision and the 1990 Gold Medal.

Some of the stories highlight how critical newspapers are to protecting basic liberties of citizens and preserving democracy. Harris tells the story of how *The New York Times* won the 1972 Gold Medal for its publication of The Pentagon Papers, and the controversy within the Pulitzer Prize Committee about whether the Gold Medal should be awarded to a project that relied on stolen documents, as the Pentagon Papers were. Harris offers new insight into the most famous Gold Medal of all, the 1973 Gold Medal to *The Washington Post* for its Watergate reporting. One Gold Medal juror expressed concern about giving the Gold Medal to reporting that used un-named sources so liberally, saying the newspaper "overindulged professional restraints on unattributed information in order to make a point." Yet as Harris notes, the stature of the Gold Medal would have severely suffered if jurors had ignored the role *The New York Times* played in the Pentagon Papers and *The Washington Post* played in uncovering Watergate.

Joseph Pulitzer, who initiated the Pulitzer Prizes late in his life, comes off as a genuine hero in the book. Even though Pulitzer is best known in history for his role in the newspaper circulation wars with the Hearst publications that spawned the yellow journalism era, his establishing of the awards rehabilitated his reputation. The impetus for establishing the awards was nothing short of magnanimous in his desire to create an award that celebrated the best journalism in the country. As for public service, Pulitzer wanted the Gold Medal to stand for outstanding work that influenced public policy. A theme that runs through all the award winners is that the jurors always wanted to award a newspaper for making positive changes in society. It rewarded news organizations for taking risks to inform the public. In all the years of awards, Harris notes not one Gold Medal that failed to meet that high standard.

The award itself has changed little through the years, but a reader of Har-

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ris' book is left to wonder if the Gold Medals awarded in the 1920s and 1930s would stack up against the awards given in the 2000s. Could the 2006 Gold Medal awarded to *The* (New Orleans) *Times-Picayune* and the Biloxi-Gulfport, Miss., *Sun Herald* for their Hurricane Katrina coverage stand up against the 1923 Gold Medal to *The* (Memphis) *Commercial Appeal* for its publication of anti-Klan cartoons? Could the 2003 Gold Medal to *The Boston Globe* for its uncovering of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church stand up to the 1927 Gold Medal to the *Canton* (Ohio) *Daily News* for its reporting that led to the assassination of its editor? Unlike a baseball historian who measures the accomplishments of Babe Ruth against Barry Bonds, Harris offers no insight into that question.

As the newspaper business continues to undergo huge changes, much of which will require news organizations to be smaller and to scale back investigative reporting, *Pulitzer's Gold* shows the barons of publishing that newspapers have contributed mightily to American society. Maybe Nixon would have resigned without *The Washington Post* or maybe Ponzi would have gone to jail anyway, but there is little doubt it was newspapers that hastened the process. *Pulitzer's Gold* offers the best examples of how newspapers have served the public in the last 80 years of American history. In these uncertain economic times for the newspaper business, the book offers excellent examples of why newspapers are worth preserving and why good journalism still matters.

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