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Joseph Pulitzer and The Pulitzer Prizes

by Seymour Topping

History of the Prizes

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. 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. Since the inception of the prizes in 1917, 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.

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 and said it will continue to monitor the field.

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. In music, the board also took tacit note of the criticism leveled at its predecessors for failure to cite two of the country's foremost jazz composers. It bestowed a Special Citation on [George Gershwin](#) marking the 1998 centennial celebration of his birth and [Duke Ellington](#) on his 1999 centennial year. In 2004, the Board further broadened the definition of the prize and the makeup of its music juries, resulting in a greater diversity of entries. In 2006, the Board also awarded a posthumous Special Citation to jazz composer [Thelonious Monk](#).

Over the years the Pulitzer board has at times been targeted by critics for awards made or not made. Controversies also have arisen over decisions made by the board counter to the advice of juries. Given the subjective nature of the award process, this was inevitable. The board has not been captive to popular inclinations. Many, if not most, of the honored books have not been on bestseller lists, and many of the winning plays have been staged off-Broadway or in regional theaters. In journalism the major newspapers, such as The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, and The Washington Post, have harvested many of the awards, but the board also has often reached out to work done by small, little-known papers. The Public Service award in 1995 went to [The Virgin Islands Daily News](#), St. Thomas, for its disclosure of the links between the region's rampant crime rate and corruption in the local criminal justice system. In 2005, the investigative reporting award went to [Willamette Week](#), an alternative newspaper in Portland, Oregon, for its exposure of a former governor's long concealed sexual misconduct with a 14-year-old girl.

In letters, the board has grown less conservative over the years in matters of taste. In 1963 the drama jury nominated Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, but the board found the script insufficiently "uplifting," a complaint that related to arguments over sexual permissiveness and rough dialogue. In 1993 the prize went to Tony Kushner's "Angels in America: Millennium Approaches," a play that dealt with problems of homosexuality and AIDS and whose script was replete with obscenities. On the same debated issue of taste, the board in 1941 denied the fiction prize to Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, but gave him the award in 1953 for *The Old Man and the Sea*, a lesser work. Notwithstanding these contretemps, from its earliest days, the board has in general stood firmly by a policy of secrecy in its deliberations

and refusal to publicly debate or defend its decisions. The challenges have not lessened the reputation of the Pulitzer Prizes as the country's most prestigious awards and as the most sought-after accolades in journalism, letters, and music. The Prizes are perceived as a major incentive for high-quality journalism and have focused worldwide attention on American achievements in letters and music.

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.

JOSEPH PULITZER, 1847-1911

Joseph Pulitzer was born in Mako, Hungary on April 10, 1847, the son of a wealthy grain merchant of Magyar-Jewish origin and a German mother who was a devout Roman Catholic. His younger brother, Albert, was trained for the priesthood but never attained it. The elder Pulitzer retired in Budapest and Joseph grew up and was educated there in private schools and by tutors. Restive at the age of seventeen, the gangling 6'2" youth decided to become a soldier and tried in turn to enlist in the Austrian Army, Napoleon's Foreign Legion for duty in Mexico, and the British Army for service in India. He was rebuffed because of weak eyesight and frail health, which were to plague him for the rest of his life. However, in Hamburg, Germany, he encountered a bounty recruiter for the U.S. Union Army and contracted to enlist as a substitute for a draftee, a procedure permitted under the Civil War draft system. At Boston he jumped ship and, as the legend goes, swam to shore, determined to keep the enlistment bounty for himself rather than leave it to the agent. Pulitzer collected the bounty by enlisting for a year in the Lincoln Cavalry, which suited him since there were many Germans in the unit. He was fluent in German and French but spoke very little English. Later, he worked his way to St. Louis. While doing odd jobs there, such as muleteer, baggage handler, and waiter, he immersed himself in the city's Mercantile Library, studying English and the law. His great career opportunity came in a unique manner in the library's chess room. Observing the game of two habitués, he astutely critiqued a move and the players, impressed, engaged Pulitzer in conversation. The players were editors of the leading German language daily, *Westliche Post*, and a job offer followed. Four years later, in 1872, the young Pulitzer, who had built a reputation as a tireless enterprising journalist, was offered a controlling interest in the paper by the nearly bankrupt owners. At age 25, Pulitzer became a publisher and there followed a series of shrewd business deals from which he emerged in 1878 as the owner of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and a rising figure on the journalistic scene.

Earlier in the same year, he and Kate Davis, a socially prominent Washingtonian woman, were married in the Protestant Episcopal Church. The Hungarian immigrant youth - once a vagrant on the slum streets of St. Louis and taunted as "Joey the Jew" - had been transformed. Now he was an American citizen and as speaker, writer, and editor had mastered English extraordinarily well. Elegantly dressed, wearing a handsome, reddish-brown beard and pince-nez glasses, he mixed easily with the social elite of St. Louis, enjoying dancing at fancy parties and horseback riding in the park. This lifestyle was abandoned abruptly when he came into the ownership of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. James Wyman Barrett, the last city editor of *The New York World*, records in his biography *Joseph Pulitzer and His World* how Pulitzer, in taking hold of the *Post-Dispatch*, "worked at his desk from early morning until midnight or later, interesting himself in every detail of the paper." Appealing to the public to accept that his paper was their champion, Pulitzer splashed investigative articles and editorials assailing government corruption, wealthy tax-dodgers, and gamblers. This populist appeal was effective, circulation mounted, and the paper prospered. Pulitzer would have been pleased to know that in the conduct of the Pulitzer Prize system which he later established, more awards in journalism would go to exposure of corruption than to any other subject.

Pulitzer paid a price for his unsparingly rigorous work at his newspaper. His health was undermined and, with his eyes failing, Pulitzer and his wife set out in 1883 for New York to board a ship on a doctor-ordered European vacation. Stubbornly, instead of boarding the steamer in New York, he met with Jay Gould, the financier, and negotiated the purchase of *The New York World*, which was in financial straits. Putting aside his serious health concerns, Pulitzer immersed himself in its direction, bringing about what Barrett describes as a "one-man revolution" in the editorial policy, content, and format of *The World*. He employed some of the same techniques that had built up the circulation of the *Post-Dispatch*. He crusaded against public and private corruption, filled the news columns with a spate of sensationalized features, made the first extensive use of illustrations, and staged news stunts. In one of the most successful promotions, *The World* raised public subscriptions for the building of a pedestal at the entrance to the New York harbor so that the Statue of Liberty, which was stranded in France awaiting shipment, could be emplaced.

The formula worked so well that in the next decade the circulation of *The World* in all its editions climbed to more than 600,000, and it reigned as the largest circulating newspaper in the country. But unexpectedly Pulitzer himself became a victim of the battle for circulation when Charles Anderson Dana, publisher of *The Sun*, frustrated by the success of *The World* launched vicious personal attacks on him as "the Jew who had denied his race and religion." The unrelenting campaign was designed to alienate New York's Jewish community from *The World*. Pulitzer's health was fractured further during this ordeal and in 1890, at the age of 43, he withdrew from the editorship of *The World* and never returned to its newsroom. Virtually blind, having in his severe depression succumbed also to an illness that made him excruciatingly sensitive to noise, Pulitzer went abroad frantically seeking cures. He failed to find them, and the next two decades of his life he spent largely in soundproofed "vaults," as he referred to them, aboard his yacht, *Liberty*, in the "Tower of Silence" at his vacation retreat in Bar Harbor Maine, and at his New York mansion. During those years, although he traveled very frequently, Pulitzer managed, nevertheless, to maintain the closest editorial and business direction of his newspapers. To ensure secrecy in his communications he relied on a code that filled a book containing some 20,000 names and terms. During the years 1896 to 1898 Pulitzer was drawn into a bitter circulation battle with William Randolph Hearst's *Journal* in

which there were no apparent restraints on sensationalism or fabrication of news. When the Cubans rebelled against Spanish rule, Pulitzer and Hearst sought to outdo each other in whipping up outrage against the Spanish. Both called for war against Spain after the U.S. battleship *Maine* mysteriously blew up and sank in Havana harbor on February 16, 1898. Congress reacted to the outcry with a war resolution. After the four-month war, Pulitzer withdrew from what had become known as "yellow journalism." *The World* became more restrained and served as the influential editorial voice on many issues of the Democratic Party. In the view of historians, Pulitzer's lapse into "yellow journalism" was outweighed by his public service achievements. He waged courageous and often successful crusades against corrupt practices in government and business. He was responsible to a large extent for passage of antitrust legislation and regulation of the insurance industry. In 1909, *The World* exposed a fraudulent payment of \$40 million by the United States to the French Panama Canal Company. The federal government lashed back at *The World* by indicting Pulitzer for criminally libeling President Theodore Roosevelt and the banker J.P. Morgan, among others. Pulitzer refused to retreat, and *The World* persisted in its investigation. When the courts dismissed the indictments, Pulitzer was applauded for a crucial victory on behalf of freedom of the press. In May 1904, writing in *The North American Review* in support of his proposal for the founding of a school of journalism, Pulitzer summarized his credo: "Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together. An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a sham and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself. The power to mould the future of the Republic will be in the hands of the journalists of future generations."

In 1912, one year after Pulitzer's death aboard his yacht, the Columbia School of Journalism was founded, and the first Pulitzer Prizes were awarded in 1917 under the supervision of the advisory board to which he had entrusted his mandate. Pulitzer envisioned an advisory board composed principally of newspaper publishers. Others would include the president of Columbia University and scholars, and "persons of distinction who are not journalists or editors." Today, the 19-member board is composed mainly of leading editors or news executives. Four academics also serve, including the president of Columbia University and the dean of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. The dean and the administrator of the prizes are nonvoting members. The chair rotates annually to the most senior member. The board is self-perpetuating in the election of members. Voting members may serve three terms of three years. In the selection of the members of the board and of the juries, close attention is given to professional excellence and affiliation, as well as diversity in terms of gender, ethnic background, geographical distribution and size of newspaper.

THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE PULITZER PRIZES

More than 2,400 entries are submitted each year in the Pulitzer Prize competitions, and only 21 awards are normally made. The awards are the culmination of a year-long process that begins early in the year with the appointment of 102 distinguished judges who serve on 20 separate juries and are asked to make three nominations in each of the 21 categories. By February 1, the Administrator's office in the Columbia School of Journalism has received more than 1,300 journalism entries. Those entries may be submitted by any individual from material appearing in a United States newspaper published daily, Sunday, or at least once a week during the calendar year. In early March, 77 editors, publishers, writers, and educators gather in the School of Journalism to judge the entries in the 14 journalism categories. From 1964-1999 each journalism jury consisted of five members. Due to the growing number of entries in the public service, investigative reporting, beat reporting, feature writing and commentary categories, these juries were enlarged to seven members beginning in 1999. The jury members, working intensively for three days, examine every entry before making their nominations. Exhibits in the public service, cartoon, and photography categories are limited to 20 articles, cartoons, or pictures, and in the remaining categories, to 10 articles or editorials - except for feature writing, which has a maximum of five articles. In photography, a single jury judges both the Breaking News category and the Feature category. Since the inception of the prizes the journalism categories have been expanded and repeatedly redefined by the board to keep abreast of the evolution of American journalism. The cartoons prize was created in 1922. The prize for photography was established in 1942, and in 1968 the category was divided into spot or breaking news and feature. With the development of computer-altered photos, the board stipulated in 1995 that "no entry whose content is manipulated or altered, apart from standard newspaper cropping and editing, will be deemed acceptable."

These are the current Pulitzer Prize category definitions for the competition:

- For a distinguished example of meritorious public service by a newspaper through the use of its journalistic resources which, as well as reporting, may include editorials, cartoons, photographs and online material.
- For a distinguished example of local reporting of breaking news, presented in print or online or both.
- For a distinguished example of investigative reporting by an individual or team, presented as a single article or series., in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of explanatory reporting that illuminates a significant and complex subject, demonstrating mastery of the subject, lucid writing and clear presentation, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of beat reporting characterized by sustained and knowledgeable coverage of a particular subject or activity, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of reporting on national affairs, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of reporting on international affairs, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of feature writing giving prime consideration to high literary quality and originality, in print or in print and online.
- For distinguished commentary, in print or in print and online.
- For distinguished criticism, in print or in print and online.
- For distinguished editorial writing, the test of excellence being clearness of style, moral purpose, sound reasoning, and power to influence public opinion in what the writer conceives to be the right direction, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished cartoon or portfolio of cartoons published during the year, characterized by originality, editorial effectiveness, quality of drawing, and pictorial effect, in print or in print and online.
- For a distinguished example of breaking news photography in black and white or color, which may consist of a photograph or photographs, a sequence or an album, in print or online or both.

- For a distinguished example of feature photography in black and white or color, which may consist of a photograph or photographs, a sequence or an album in print or in print and online.

While the journalism process goes forward, shipments of books totaling some 1,000 titles are being sent to five letters juries for their judging in these categories:

- For distinguished fiction by an American author, preferably dealing with American life.
- For a distinguished book upon the history of the United States.
- For a distinguished biography or autobiography by an American author
- For a distinguished volume of original verse by an American author.
- For a distinguished book of non-fiction by an American author that is not eligible for consideration in any other category.

The award in poetry was established in 1922 and that for non-fiction in 1962.

For the drama prize, a jury, usually composed of three critics, one academic and one playwright, attends plays both in New York and the regional theaters. The award in drama goes to a playwright but production of the play as well as script are taken into account.

The music jury, usually made up of three composers, one newspaper critic and one presenter of musical work, meets in New York to listen to recordings and study the scores of pieces, which number more than 150. The category definition states:

For distinguished musical composition by an American that has had its first performance or recording in the United States during the year.

The final act of the annual competition is enacted in early April when the board assembles for two days in the Pulitzer World Room of the Columbia School of Journalism. In prior weeks, the board had read the texts of the journalism entries and the 15 nominated books, listened to music cassettes, read the scripts of the nominated plays, and attended the performances or seen videos where possible. By custom, it is incumbent on board members not to vote on any award under consideration unless they have reviewed the entries. There are subcommittees for letters and music whose members usually give a lead to discussions. Beginning with letters and music, the board, in turn, reviews the nominations of each jury. Each jury is required to offer three nominations but in no order of preference, although the jury chair in a report accompanying the submission can broadly reflect the views of the members. Board discussions are animated and often hotly debated. Work done by individuals tends to be favored. In journalism, if more than three individuals are cited in an entry, any prize goes to the newspaper. Awards are usually made by majority vote, but the board is also empowered to vote 'no award,' or by three-fourths vote to select an entry that has not been nominated or to switch nominations among the categories. If the board is dissatisfied with the nominations of any jury, it can ask the Administrator to consult with the chair by telephone to ascertain if there are other worthy entries. Meanwhile, the deliberations continue.

Both the jury nominations and the awards voted by the board are held in strict confidence until the announcement of the prizes, which takes place several days after the meeting in the World Room. Towards three o'clock p.m. (Eastern Time) of the day of the announcement, in hundreds of newsrooms across the United States, journalists gather to wait for the bulletins that bring explosions of joy and celebrations to some and disappointment to others. The announcement is made precisely at three o'clock after a news conference held by the administrator in the World Room. Apart from accounts carried prominently by newspapers, television, radio, and Internet sites, the details appear on the Pulitzer Web site. The announcement includes the name of the winner in each category as well as the names of the other two finalists. The three [finalists](#) in each category are the only entries in the competition that are recognized by the Pulitzer office as nominees. The announcement also lists the board members and the names of the jurors (which have previously been kept confidential to avoid lobbying.)

A gold medal is awarded to the winner in Public Service. Along with the certificates in the other categories, there are cash awards of \$10,000, raised in 2002 from \$7,500. Five Pulitzer fellowships of \$7,500 each are also awarded annually on the recommendation of the faculty of the School of Journalism. They enable four of its outstanding graduates to travel, report, and study abroad and one fellowship is awarded to a graduate who wishes to specialize in drama, music, literary, film, or television criticism. For most recipients of the Pulitzer prizes, the cash award is only incidental to the prestige accruing to them and their works. There are numerous competitions that bestow far larger cash awards, yet which do not rank in public perception on a level with the Pulitzers. The Pulitzer accolade on the cover of a book or on the marquee of a theater where a prize-winning play is being staged usually does translate into commercial gain.

The Pulitzer process initially was funded by investment income from the original endowment. But by the 1970s the program was suffering a loss each year. In 1978 the advisory board established a foundation for the creation of a supplementary endowment, and fund raising on its behalf continued through the 1980s. The program is now comfortably funded with investment income from the two endowments and the \$50 fee charged for each entry into the competitions. The investment portfolios are administered by Columbia University. Members of the Pulitzer Prize Board and journalism jurors receive no compensation. The jurors in letters, music, and drama, in appreciation of their year-long work, receive honoraria of \$2,000, with jury chair getting \$2,500.

Unlike the elaborate ceremonies and royal banquets attendant upon the presentation of the [Nobel Prizes](#) in Stockholm and Oslo, Pulitzer winners receive their prizes from the president of Columbia University at a modest but mellow luncheon in May in the rotunda of the Low Library in the presence of family members, professional associates, board members, and the faculty of the School of Journalism. The board has declined offers to transform the occasion into a television extravaganza.

-- updated June 2006 by Sig Gissler, Administrator, The Pulitzer Prizes

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