Books

Book Review: "Pulitzer’s Gold: A Century of Public Service Journalism"

By Roy J. Harris Jr. (Columbia University Press)

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The Pulitzer Prize’s public-service award is given annually to recognize reporting that demonstrates a “measurable impact in the community.” Often, these are the stories that have commanded the nation’s attention — Watergate, Katrina, 9/11, the Catholic Church abuse scandal. In *Pulitzer’s Gold: A Century of Public Service Journalism,* Roy J. Harris Jr. traces the history of the award over a hundred years, portraying the delicate web of teamwork that goes into producing an in-depth news package. The depiction of the faith, strategy, and bankrolling that some stories require is masterful; the book is essential reading for aspiring and seasoned newshounds alike.

In newsrooms and courtrooms, on stakeouts and in back alleys, in rural communities and church basements, Harris illustrates the stirrings of each story before it became a Pulitzer winner. Some of those behind-the-scenes details are mundane; others are harrowing. For example, Harris describes the scene at the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* building where, in 2005, 140 reporters were camped out overnight to cover Hurricane Katrina: “The sudden quiet within contrasted sharply with the howling wind without. Any who were dozing early that morning awoke abruptly. A large window in an executive office blew in, and then another, and another.”

Other anecdotes are more obscure, and provide charming insight into the way a less obvious story can develop. In one chapter, for example, Harris takes us to a highway overpass in Florida, where a pair of *Sun Sentinel* reporters were staging a 5 a.m. stakeout, hoping to catch off-duty cops speeding. It was raining, their equipment was hardly top of the line, and with headlights shining in their faces, they couldn’t tell which cars belonged to police officers anyhow. They retreated and, using records from police cars’ transponders, were able to publish the story and ultimately win the

award.

This muscular revision of *Pulitzer's Gold* — originally published in 2007 — is well-timed for the prize's centennial. Pulitzer famously created his awards in a time when journalism was hardly revered or respected. One hundred years later, reporters face a different set of crises: how news stories are read and funded and what that means for the survival of the profession. What Harris's book shows is that, over the course of the past century, the Pulitzer Prize for public service has remained a beacon, reminding us that important stories are reported every day, and that the people publishing them can and do exact political change.



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