

The Pulitzer Prize

- 1▶ The Pulitzer Prize came about as part of an attempt by newspaperman Joseph T. Pulitzer to upgrade the profession of journalism. Pulitzer, the owner of the *New York World* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, made a proposal in 1903 to Columbia University to make a \$2 million bequest to the university for the dual purposes of establishing a school of journalism at the university and also awarding prizes for exceptional work in journalism and other fields. However, the university did not initially respond as one might expect to such a seemingly generous offer.
- 2▶ Interestingly, Columbia University was not immediately amenable to the proposal by Pulitzer inasmuch as journalism was not held in high regard in general and Pulitzer's papers were more known for their sensationalization of the news than for the high quality of the journalism. The trustees of the university were not at all sure at first that they wanted a school of journalism because newspaper reporting was considered more of a trade than a profession at the time, and they did not want to diminish the academic prestige of their institution. It took years of discussion and negotiation to agree on the terms for establishing the school of journalism and the prizes bearing Pulitzer's name, and it was not actually until the year after Pulitzer's death in 1911 that construction began on the building to house Columbia's new school of journalism. The school of journalism opened in 1913, and the first prizes were awarded in 1917, for work done the previous year.
- 3▶ The method for selecting Pulitzer Prize winners and the categories for prizes have changed slightly over the years. Today, more than twenty-one different awards are given in three different areas, with the majority of awards going to journalists; fourteen of the awards are from various aspects of journalism (i.e., news reporting, feature writing, cartoons, and photography), six awards are given in letters (fiction, nonfiction, history, drama, poetry, and biography), and one award in music. Award categories are reevaluated and modified as modes of written communication have altered. Categories that become obsolete are eliminated; the category for telegraphic reporting, based on the telegram, was discontinued once the telegraph fell out of widespread use. Conversely, categories have expanded to include written work produced and presented through advancements in technology. For example, in 2008, the first online-only submissions were accepted for review. Prior to that, any work that was considered had to come originally from a printed source.
- 4▶ The process to achieve an award has several steps. First, the Pulitzer Prize hopeful submits his work for consideration. Anyone who has published work that meets the conditions for entry is allowed to submit his work, and the prize committees will not look at any publications that have not been formally entered. Columbia University appoints nominating juries comprising experts in each field, who carefully review each of the entries. The juries select the top three entries in each category that they feel are most qualified and they submit these nominations to the Pulitzer Prize Board, which makes the final decisions and awards the prizes. While there are various nominating juries for the different categories, a single board makes the decisions for all of the categories.
- 5▶ Because of its prestige, the Pulitzer Prize is one of the most sought after awards in writing. Winners are considered the best writers in their respective fields, and for this reason, thousands of authors submit their work each year, even though the monetary compensation for winning is relatively small. Past winners have used the positive publicity and reputation generated by the award to launch or strengthen their writing careers.
- 6▶ The award is not without its detractors, however. One of the most famous opponents of the award was Robert R. "Colonel" McCormick, former editor and publisher of the *Chicago Tribune*. He disputed the validity of the prize, feeling that it was little more than a bribe. As a result, McCormick would not honor any *Chicago Tribune* journalists who were named as winners. His stance against the Pulitzer Prize continued throughout his tenure at the newspaper, ending in 1961.

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