

# 2004 best newspaper writing

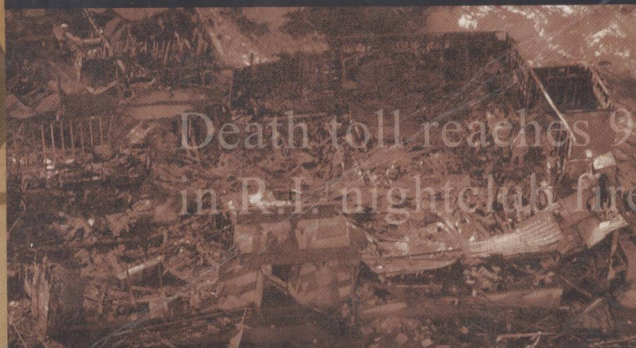
EDITED BY KEITH WOODS



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Featuring Community Service Photojournalism Award on Companion CD-ROM



Death toll reaches 9 in P.F. nightclub fire

WINNERS: THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS COMPETITION

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# BEST NEWSPAPER WRITING 2004

WINNERS: THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF  
NEWSPAPER EDITORS COMPETITION

Featuring  
Community Service Photojournalism Award  
and Companion CD-ROM

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EDITED BY KEITH WOODS

The Poynter Institute  
and  
Bonus Books

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5 4 3 2 1

International Standard Book Number: 1-56625-234-2

International Standard Serial Number: 0195-895X

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Cover illustration by Director of Publications Billie M. Keirstead from a concept developed by Phillip Gary Design, St. Petersburg, Fla. Photos for the cover illustration were provided by the Associated Press and are used with permission. Photo credits: Robert E. Klein (nightclub fire), Dr. Scott Lieberman (space shuttle), pool photographer Tony Nicoletti (Iraqis), and Brian Vander Brug (grieving woman).

Photos in the Community Service Photojournalism section were provided by the photographers. Photos of winners and finalists were provided by their news organizations.

*Printed in the United States of America*

To the journalists who still believe  
there is no excellence without truth.

# An enduring icon of excellence

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MAY 2004

Smiles come easily to Neal Shine, and he draws them from those around him. He glides through newsroom stories that begin with humor and end as salutes to journalists and their great work.

Shine's career spanned 45 years at the *Detroit Free Press*, beginning as a part-time copy boy in 1950 and ending with his retirement as publisher in 1995. His stories, like those you'll find in this book, capture the energy of newsroom successes.

He spun some of those yarns at a reception one day in the spring of 2004 as a guest at Michigan State University's Neal Shine Ethics Symposium. The setting created powerful contrasts, beginning with the sight of the 75-year-old Shine and his wife greeting student journalists just out of their teens.

Then there was the difference between the mood inside the conference center and a symbol outside. Inside, the crowd faced societal uncertainty about the job market, the economy, the war, and the news business. Outside, there was Michigan State University's most recognizable landmark: a statue of a soldier from antiquity, a Spartan grasping his helmet, sure of himself and his mission.

Shine and "Sparty" have so much in common. Both are tall with strong features. Neither has much hair. They have memorable expressions: Sparty has the vaguely stern look of his cousin, the Academy Award's Oscar. Shine has the constant look of one enjoying a private joke. The two share a sense of purpose. Sparty's bearing evokes determination. Shine's life reveals a commitment to excellence.

For most of 2003 and much of 2004, student journalists heard about highly publicized failings. They heard about journalists who deceived, fabricated, plagiarized, and manipulated facts and photos. At the Neal Shine lectures, by contrast, students reading the printed program learned about a man "dedicated to fairness, accuracy, and a humanitarian approach to reporting." They learned about "his commitment to ethical journalism."

Shine once wrote a column that told of his start at the *Free Press* and how, as a copy boy in the 1950s, he regularly talked with a staffer who was in his 70s. Shine called him Eddie Guest, but many people know him as the poet Edgar A. Guest. He started at the newspaper in 1895 and remained throughout his career, often writing verse for the editorial page.

Guest taught Shine this lesson: that the newspaper's purpose was to use its power to help those who had run out of choices.

During his first decade at the *Free Press*, Shine learned another lesson. City editor John Driver told him, "People have to believe in your paper or else it's all a lost cause."

Shine's stories are about journalists who believed in those values of integrity and purpose. They tell of a newsroom in which people made sacrifices to help those with nowhere else to turn; of staff members who worked long hours to nail an important story; of journalism that touched lives, revealed wrongs, and made things right.

At the top of that list of stories is one from 1967, when Shine's staff covered Detroit's riots. When the violence ended, the *Free Press* staff wondered, "Why did 43 people die?" A staff effort to answer that question took five weeks of 12-hour days. They found the answer: Most of the deaths could have—and should have—been prevented. The effort also led to the 1968 Pulitzer Prize for local reporting.

Quality journalism didn't end with Shine's stories, and it isn't confined to Detroit. Each year, this book makes that point. Once again, *Best Newspaper Writing* holds up examples of excellence from news organizations and individuals from across the country.

This year, led by Tim J. McGuire of Plymouth, Minn., the judges were:

Jim Amoss, *The Times-Picayune*, New Orleans  
 Caesar Andrews, Gannett News Service, McLean, Va.  
 Gilbert Bailon, *The Dallas Morning News*  
 Amanda Bennett, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*  
 Peter Bhatia, *The Oregonian*, Portland  
 Neil Brown, *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*  
 Jerry Ceppos, Knight Ridder, San Jose, Calif.  
 Milton Coleman, *The Washington Post*



Gregory Favre, The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Fla.  
 Deborah Howell, Newhouse News Service,  
 Washington, D.C.

David Laventhol, New York

Pam Luecke, Washington and Lee University,  
 Lexington, Va.

Rich Oppel, *Austin* (Texas) *American-Statesman*

Chris Peck, *The Commercial Appeal*, Memphis, Tenn.

Skip Perez, *The Ledger*, Lakeland, Fla.

Maddy Ross, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Janet Weaver, The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Fla.

Jim Willse, *The Star-Ledger*, Newark, N.J.

They were aided in selecting the community service  
 photojournalism award by Carolyn Lee, formerly of *The*  
*New York Times*, and three other experts:

Vin Alabiso, Associated Press

Marcia Prouse, *The Orange County Register*,  
 Santa Ana, Calif.

Kenny Irby, The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, Fla.

The Poynter Institute congratulates the winners and  
 thanks writing committee members for their good work.  
 These stories offer reporting that informs communities  
 and helps those who have run out of choices. Their selec-  
 tions remind us that believable journalism is not a lost  
 cause. Like Neal Shine and his inspirational stories, ex-  
 cellent journalism endures.

Karen Brown Dunlap, President  
 The Poynter Institute

# Acknowledgments

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The making of *Best Newspaper Writing* can sometimes seem like an orchestrated train wreck. In four short months, the crush of interviews, essays, and photographs collide constantly with the clock as a team of people report, write, and pore over every word and image. But when the smoke clears, journalists are left with a book that uplifts, illuminates, and instructs. Many people make that happen.

It begins with the winners and finalists who pushed their craft to a higher plane. They were chosen by judges from the American Society of Newspaper Editors, who give of their time each winter to make the selections. And our efforts are helped greatly by the work ASNE executive director Scott Bosley and assistant Suzanne Martin did in getting the materials to us quickly. But it's impossible to overstate the role publications director Billie M. Keirstead and assistant Vicki Krueger have played in herding writers, photographers, interviewers—and the editor. They got editing help from John Schlander, Kathleen Tobin, and Mark Wood.

Thanks, too, to Poynter faculty members who conducted interviews and wrote biographies and Writers' Workshops: Poynter vice president Roy Peter Clark, Aly Colón, Kenny Irby, Kelly McBride, Bill Mitchell, Christopher Scanlan, and dean Janet Weaver. Their efforts during one of the Institute's busiest times are deeply appreciated.

Poynter design editor and faculty member Anne Conneen designed the CD-ROM presentation with technical help from multimedia editor Larry Larsen. Others from Poynter put time and energy into producing this book, including library director David Shedden and Bobbi Alsina.

Each year, we all arrive at the nexus of journalistic excellence and academic inquiry, to sometimes-cacophonous effect. The result of that collision, though, is another volume of this series that celebrates the best of journalism.



# In praise of writing's unsung heroes

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BY KEITH WOODS

Writing, for me, has not gotten easier with time. After more than 25 years at the professional keyboard, the words come no quicker. I still loiter interminably at the lead, slog tortuously through the body, stumble giddily upon a kicker.

Then I pray for good editing.

That's the part of the writing process that we speak least about, especially when celebrating the accomplishments of great writers. But talk to many—maybe most—of the journalists whose stories are honored in this book, and eventually they'll mention people who had a hand in the winning work, people whose names never appear in the byline.

In many ways, *Best Newspaper Writing 2004* is an ode to editors.

They coach, inspire, and provoke. For the winners included in the 26th edition of this book, editors played a critical role, from idea to rewrite.

Take *The Charlotte Observer's* Tommy Tomlinson. He won the ASNE Distinguished Writing Award for Profile Writing, and you'll get some insight into how he did that by reading his interview with Poynter's Chip Scanlan.

You'll also learn how his editor, Mike Gordon, would sit him down and read the whole story out loud—an "excruciating and incredibly powerful" experience, Tomlinson calls it.

S. Lynne Walker's editor did the same thing as she worked on the series for Copley News Service that won the Freedom Forum/ASNE Award for Distinguished Writing on Diversity. In Walker's case, though, editor Susan White from *The San Diego Union-Tribune* read the entire four-part series over the telephone from 1,500 miles away while Walker sat on the other end in Mexico City.

"That's an enormous commitment of time on the part of an editor, but it's just absolutely crucial," Walker tells Poynter's Aly Colón.

Writers can come up with lots of words to describe

what they think of editors, but not everyone will stop in the middle of a sentence, as the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*'s Cathy Frye did, and say, "This is why I love my editor." She was talking about how Jay Grelen, who edited Frye's non-deadline prize winner "Caught in the Web," had freed her, with a simple sentence of support, to reveal the facts of a tragedy the way the people in the story had lived it.

"I had struggled and struggled with that first draft," Frye tells Poynter's Kelly McBride. "Once I had the all-clear from [Grelen] to do it the way that he and I intuitively thought it should be done, it was just so much easier."

Sometimes the editor's most important contribution happens at an even higher level of abstraction. Sometimes before the first word is written.

Before the bombs started falling on Baghdad, Anthony Shadid of *The Washington Post* needed to decide how he would tell the daily tales of war in a way that had coherence and meaning beyond the moment. In his interview with Poynter dean Janet Weaver, Shadid describes how editors helped form the coverage that led him to the Jesse Laventhol Prize for Deadline News Reporting and a Pulitzer Prize:

"One editor, Ed Cody, said, 'You're there; say what it's like. Bring an authority to your voice that you wouldn't maybe have otherwise.' And another editor, David Hoffman, said to understand the forces from below; understand social forces; understand what's happening to the city. And finally, Phil Bennett said to really focus on sentiment. 'Those sentiments you're exploring may be one of the defining qualities of this war.'"

For finalists in the ASNE contest, the sentiments toward editors were similar:

■ *The Wall Street Journal* team credits an editor for negotiating a truce with sources irate about the newspaper's dogged coverage of an unfolding scandal at the New York Stock Exchange.

■ Lane DeGregory says her editor at the *St. Petersburg Times* gave her some common-sense advice as she wrestled with how to turn a tale she thought would take days into a daily story. The advice: "This is a simple, lovely story. Just tell it like it happened."

■ *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* columnist Robert L.

Jamieson gives credit to his editors because they were willing to “loosen the leash” and give him license to tell good stories.

It could be that these are all kind, well-placed words by politically savvy writers trying to curry future favor with their bosses. Read on, though, and you’ll get the sense that they mean it.

How else to explain that the *Observer*’s Tommy Tomlinson has named a technique he used for ending one of his stories after an editor.

He called the ending a “Schwab.”

Want to know why? I won’t tell you just yet. I hear it’s good to make the reader wait for some things.

I don’t remember who taught me that, but I think it was an editor.

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

Through recorded conversations, follow-up calls, and e-mails, members of the Poynter faculty produced the interviews that follow the stories honored in this book. For the sake of clarity, flow, and brevity, some of the answers have been compressed and reordered, and some questions have been edited or added. The biographies of winners and finalists were written by Poynter faculty and include information provided by the journalists.

Electronic versions of the winners’ and finalists’ stories were provided to Poynter by ASNE for publication in this book. They may differ slightly from the stories that originally appeared in print.

*Best Newspaper Writing* editors made minor changes in stories for style and grammar. Where editors found errors of fact, those were corrected after consultation with the writers.

# **Best Newspaper Writing 2004**

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## Cathy Frye

### Non-Deadline Writing

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Cathy Frye's vision for a narrative series began where the story opens, just outside the home of a murdered child.

In December 2002, Frye stood on the front porch asking for an interview with the family of Kacie Woody, who had been kidnapped and killed. The family said no. Frye walked away. She called back and sent letters. She went on maternity leave. She came back to work. And still she couldn't stop thinking about how much more there was to say about Kacie's death.

Before her arrival at the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* in 1999, Frye, 34, spent her entire journalism career in a series of Texas towns.

After graduating from the University of North Texas in Denton, she worked as a copy editor at the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, where she found herself desk-bound, addicted to caffeine, and gaining weight. "Copy

editing was not for me,” she says.

She moved on to a reporting job at the *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal* and then to the *Odessa American*, where she also spent a year as the night city editor.

Her favorite stories out of Odessa were about a stand-off in the remote Davis Mountains. A militant separatist group called the Republic of Texas held state troopers at bay for a week in 1997. Frye and her fellow reporters covered the story around the clock. She came home with the worst sunburn of her life and bruises from sleeping in the bed of her pickup. “I had a marvelous time,” she says.

Shortly after the standoff, Frye took a job with *The Beaumont Enterprise*. When James Byrd Jr. was dragged to his death behind a pickup truck, Frye was the lead reporter. A few days later, while the town was swarming with national media, Frye persuaded the sheriff to let her and a photographer take a look at the murder weapon—a primer-gray 1982 Ford pickup.

Small-town journalism has taught her the importance of accuracy, credibility, and staying in touch with readers. It’s impossible to get away with sloppy work when you are constantly running into your sources at the grocery store, she says.

For the *Democrat-Gazette*, Frye has covered several national stories, including traveling to Oklahoma City for Timothy McVeigh’s execution and to New York after Sept. 11.

Frye is known in the newsroom for her compassion, humor, and persistence. It took months to get Rick Woody to talk about his daughter.

“Most reporters quit trying. And the story fades away,” she says. “I don’t forget.”

It took three months to report the series, “Caught in the Web.” On Oct. 1, 2003, Frye stood in the front yard of the Woody home as a photographer took pictures. It was dusk. They looked through the windows and saw what the killer saw. That became the introduction to her series.

Frye is married to photojournalist Rick McFarland. Their daughter, Amanda, sometimes shows her affection for her parents’ work by eating the Sunday paper.

—Kelly McBride