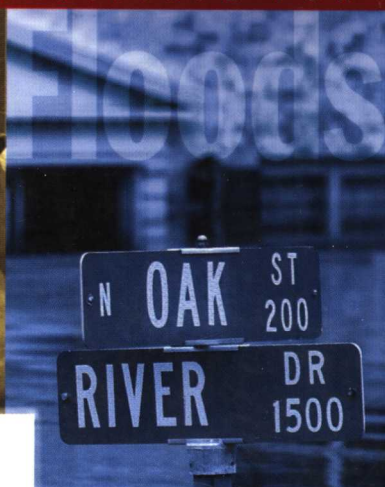


Edited by Christopher Scanlan



Winners: The American Society of Newspaper Editors Competition



2001 best newspaper writing

Best Newspaper Writing 2000

**WINNERS: THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF
NEWSPAPER EDITORS COMPETITION**

EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER SCANLAN

**The Poynter Institute
and
Bonus Books, Inc.**

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This book is dedicated to the news librarians and researchers whose skills and often-unsung efforts provide the foundation of facts on which the best writing stands; and to our colleague, Nora Paul, who shares the keys to the treasures of the information age.

‘Chariots of Fire’ and other torch songs

MAY 2000

Roy Peter Clark’s spindly white legs pumped in slow motion as he lumbered across the Great Hall. *Chariots of Fire* theme music blasted from a boombox. Ahead, his chunky torso tilted forward in the classic pose of an Olympian anticipating the relay exchange, Christopher “Chip” Scanlan waited. Clark drew steadily near until at last his arm stretched and—there!—he handed to Scanlan the flashlight tricked up to resemble a torch.

The torch has passed.

At The Poynter Institute we take journalism, but not ourselves, seriously. We understand how good writing can be abetted by a culture in which people pass on understanding to one another. So we vamped a bit when, after founding and for eight years guiding the National Writers Workshops across America, Roy Clark passed the torch of leadership to Chip Scanlan.

Writing for publication is less often a lonely art than a collaborative craft. That’s why some of its most successful practitioners donate their time each spring in seven or eight cities to give tips, techniques, and encouragement to anyone who attends a National Writers Workshop. Writers such as Clarence Page of the *Chicago Tribune* or Ron Suskind of *The Wall Street Journal* and editors like Jacqui Banaszynski of *The Seattle Times* or Cynthia Tucker of *The Atlanta Constitution*—many of them winners of ASNE Distinguished Writing Awards and Pulitzer Prizes—give spellbinding performances about their craft. “You don’t have to be from the big to do big stories,” Banaszynski said this year in Indianapolis. “A masthead is not destiny.”

The sessions are on weekends. They’re cheap. They’re usually within driving range of most American journalists. They’re instructional, they’re inspirational, they’re way cool. They’re a wonderful introduction to Poynter, a school for journalists where many of these superb writers also have taught, and learned, and where this and 21 previous editions of *Best Newspaper Writing* are prepared.

We nearly stopped producing the book a couple of years ago. The Internet was seducing people from supposed "dead tree" journalism. It took copious time and talent to prepare the ASNE award winners' copy and interview them to gather their insights and create guides for writing teachers. We toyed with the notion that it would be easier on Poynter merely to publish the winners on our website and perhaps produce an anthology of their work every three or four years.

But something odd happened. Sales of *Best Newspaper Writing* increased. A 20th anniversary collection of pieces from the contest, prepared for the ASNE convention in 1998, was so popular that it led to a more polished edition, and that led to an expanded and more sophisticated version that soon will be published by Bedford/St. Martins. *Best Newspaper Writing* thrives.

So, of course, does the competition from which these exemplary writers were selected. You can't know how devoted to the responsibility of selecting them is the committee that judges the competition. It's hard work. Yet members of the ASNE Writing Awards Board are not volunteers; they are appointed by the society's president. Serving is an honor.

Those honored by judging this year were led by Sandra Rowe, editor of *The Oregonian* in Portland. Her colleagues were:

Joann Byrd, *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*
 Leonard Downie Jr., *The Washington Post*
 Michael R. Fancher, *The Seattle Times*
 Robert H. Giles, Media Studies Center, New York
 Karla Garrett Harshaw, *Springfield (Ohio) News-Sun*
 Clark Hoyt, Knight Ridder Washington Bureau
 Tonnie L. Katz, *Orange County Register*
 Carolyn Lee, *The New York Times*
 Gregory Moore, *The Boston Globe*
 Michael Parks, *Los Angeles Times*
 Robert Rivard, *San Antonio Express-News*
 Edward Seaton, *The Manhattan (Kan.) Mercury*
 Paul Tash, *St. Petersburg Times*
 Cynthia Tucker, *The Atlanta Constitution*
 Howard Tyner, *Chicago Tribune*

These folks are mentors to good writers. So are many of the award winners. So are my colleagues at Poynter.

One of the important messages from this 22nd volume of *Best Newspaper Writing* is that each of us benefits from having, and from being, mentors. Last year, Mirta Ojito of *The New York Times* paid homage to her mentor, Fabiola Santiago, who guided Ojito at *El Nuevo Herald* and at its sister paper, *The Miami Herald*. Here is how Ojito described Santiago's influence:

"I recently saw notes that she has sent me through the years, and I was reminded that she taught me everything. I remember in particular that she was very good, and is still very good herself, with leads. I remember when I was really young and I was traveling to assignments all over the world, I would call her at whatever hour and I would say, 'You know, I'm trying to say this,' and she would just automatically help me to write the lead. I nicknamed her 'The Leading Lady.'"

For those few moments when they were creating a scene by exchanging the torch, Roy Clark and Chip Scanlan were our Leading Men. They, too, have been mentors for years, including to each other. Roy launched the series of books you hold in your hand, and Chip has been their editor for seven years. Here's hoping you have as much fun learning from them as I do.

Cheers,
Jim Naughton, President
The Poynter Institute

Acknowledgments

To produce this book on a journalism deadline requires the hard work and cooperation of many people and organizations, chief among them the American Society of Newspaper Editors and its member papers. Our special thanks to ASNE executive director Scott Bosley, Sandra Mims Rowe of *The Oregonian*, who chaired the writing awards committee, and her judging colleagues. The Associated Press continued to generously provide the news photos used on the cover.

Once again, the series has been especially enriched by Poynter faculty and staff. Roy Peter Clark, Aly Colón, Karen Brown Dunlap, and Keith Woods each interviewed a winning writer. Kenny Irby provided a conversation with a visual collaborator to one of the winning entries. David Shedden, of Poynter's Eugene Patterson Library, once again assembled the bibliography that is an important regular feature. Billie Keirstead, publications director, supervised the entire effort, assisted by Vicki Krueger, an experienced copy editor who wrote the Writers' Workshop sections. They were aided by Patty Cox and Kathleen Tobin, skilled copy editors, and Priscilla Ely, Martin Gregor, Nancy Stewart, and Joyce Barrett of the Institute staff.

Readers benefit most of all from the stories and lessons about reporting and writing shared by the winners and finalists of this year's Distinguished Writing Awards and Jesse Laventhol Prizes. Our thanks to the writers for the good work that fills these pages and for generously sharing the stories behind the stories.

Piercing the fog of personal concern

“Can you remember five things you read in the paper?”

That question was posed by Susan Cheever, the writer and former journalist, in an exchange on *Slate*, the online magazine. “I never can. News,” she went on, “has to filter in to me through this fog of personal concern, and not much of it, I have the feeling, gets there. I do read *The New York Times* every day and sometimes the tabs or *The Wall Street Journal*. I watch the news almost every night. Still, my principle concerns seem to be baloney sandwiches, the holes in my kids’ clothes, the puppy’s whining.”

Piercing the fog of personal concern: that’s the challenge that faces everyone who hopes to attract a reader. The best stories do that. They drag a reader away from the baloney sandwiches, the whining puppies, and the holes that need darning. They demand to be read.

But how does that happen? If you ask a writer that question, you’ll often hear something like this: I don’t know. I just have to get my lead and the rest of it writes itself.

Stories that write themselves. Who doesn’t want one of those?

But ask reporters what’s the most important lesson they learned reporting and writing a story. It stops them dead. “Hmm. Never thought of it that way.” “Well, let’s see.” “Hey, you know what I learned? People like to talk.” “I decided to write this one for my mom, so she’d understand it.” Sometimes it seems so simple.

But the simplest explanations are usually the best. That’s what William of Occam, a 14th century philosopher decided, and to this day scientists are guided by what became known as Occam’s Razor—the proposition that an investigator confronted with multiple explanations of a phenomenon can often solve the mystery by focusing on the simplest solution first.

But the best thing about prize-winning stories is the opportunity they offer to teach us how to get better at our craft. It’s one thing to read a great story and another

to hear how it was produced. In the interviews and essays published here, the writers whose work is featured in this book share lessons they learned producing award-winning work. At ASNE's convention last April, the winners of this year's *Best Newspaper Writing* awards offered these reflections on this question: "What lesson did you learn during the reporting and writing of this story that might be of use to other journalists trying to get better at their craft?"

Many of us view great writing as an unexplainable, mysterious alchemy that requires a combination of genius and luck. But when you view writing as a process, a rational series of decisions and steps from the initial idea to the final moments of revision, then you can begin to discover the keys to the magic: the lessons learned that enable journalists to write stories that pierce the fog of personal concern.

Lesson One: Connect with readers' fundamental concerns. Or what Joel Rawson, executive editor of *The Providence Journal*, once described as writing about "the joys and costs of being human."

Mitchell Zuckoff of *The Boston Globe* won the non-deadline prize this year for "Choosing Naia." It's a chronicle of one family's emotional, medical, and moral roller-coaster ride with genetic testing and the birth and first birthday of their daughter, Naia. In the stories, he combines precise reporting with narrative skill to take readers on a powerful journey that wrestles with some of today's most pressing issues. It opens this way:

Tierney looks radiant in a new black-and-white striped dress, smiling and chatting as she pulls it up to expose a gentle bulge in her normally flat stomach.

She lies on a table in the fourth-floor obstetrics room at St. Francis Hospital in Hartford. Her husband, Greg, sits in a chair beside her, watching as a technician begins the routine ultrasound test that is their last task before a weeklong vacation on Martha's Vineyard.

The technician, Maryann Kolano, strokes Tierney's belly with a sonogram wand, using sound waves to create a picture of the life inside. Greg

studies the video screen, fascinated by the details emerging from what looks like a half-developed Polaroid. An arm here, a leg there, a tiny face in profile. Then the internal organs: brain, liver, kidneys.

"I'm having a hard time seeing the heart. Maybe the baby's turned," Kolano says calmly. Then it appears, pumping in a confident rhythm. She stops the moving image, capturing a vivid cross-section, and Greg remembers his high school biology.

"All mammals have four chambers in the heart," Greg thinks to himself. "There are only three chambers there..."

The inescapable truth is staring at Tierney and Greg from the silent screen: There is no fourth chamber. There is a hole in the heart. And not just any hole, they will soon learn...

A hole in the heart. In their baby's and, suddenly, in their own.

Zuckoff learned many lessons in the months he worked on this story. Perhaps the most important, he said, was this: "We learned just how hungry our readers were for a story like this. We were overwhelmed. We had over 2,000 responses, people pouring their hearts out to us about their experiences in similar cases....And it made us think about the kind of connection that we could make with our readers. We talk about a lot of the challenges facing newspapers and the different ways we need to reconnect, re-engage our readers.

The lesson I took away was when you write about issues that affect the fundamental parts of their lives, not ever giving up the mandate that we have to do all the other things that we do, we can reinvigorate our relationship with our readers."

Lesson Two: Write while you're reporting.

Leonora Bohen LaPeter of the *Savannah Morning News* won the Jesse Laventhol Prize for deadline news reporting by an individual for a story that took readers into a Georgia courtroom for a dramatic murder trial. Her deadline accounts delivered a riveting portrait of a horrific crime and its aftermath.

MONROE—Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap. Pause. Tap. Tap. Tap.

Ashley Lewis hit the counter of the oak witness box with his index finger, mimicking what he heard through a crack in the bathroom window the night of Dec. 4, 1997, as he got ready for bed.

It sounded like a typewriter. But Lewis, testifying on the first day in the death penalty trial of Jerry Scott Heidler for the murder of a family in Santa Claus a year-and-a-half ago, found it hard to believe his mother, a secretary, would break out her typewriter at almost 2 a.m. Just a half hour before, she had told him to turn the television off and go to bed.

Lewis walked to his mother's room and turned on the light. She was asleep in bed. He walked through the house, turning on other lights. Nothing.

"I got this eerie feeling," Lewis said.

Lewis did not know it yet, but a half-mile away, four of his neighbors lay dead.

"Write while you're reporting." That's the lesson LaPeter said she learned from this story. "In other words, think about how you write the story while you're reporting it. Basically, the second I got to the courthouse every morning I would be looking for my lead, I'd be looking for details, quotes, for the transition, and I'd also be looking for the structure of my story. I'd be thinking about this all day long while I was reporting, and then in the afternoon, I would go into the back of the courtroom and try to tap out my lead while court was still going on. Then at six o'clock when court was out, I would go to the hotel and it wasn't, 'How am I going to write this?' It was, 'What am I going to write, what details am I going to use?' I was able to save time and put out a better story. I was able to go over the story a couple of times and make sure that it read well, and my editor had some more time with the story. Another thing I learned was that it was helpful to have a box on the side of the story that gave the details of what happened that day. For example, when the prosecution closed their case or whatever might have happened that day. I was able to write in a narrative style and not have to clog up the story with details of what happened that day."

Lesson Three: Create a comfort zone for the people you interview.

Leonora LaPeter was one reporter. At the *St. Petersburg Times* there were many reporters. There were photographers. There was a news researcher. There were editors in Tampa and in St. Petersburg. All of them collaborating to cover another horrific crime, and this time recreating the minutes of terror when a hotel worker opened fire in a Tampa hotel and left five dead. They reconstructed the shooting and profiled the victims and the accused shooter in a well-reported and skillfully written package. Their work won this year's Jesse Laventhol Prize for deadline news reporting by a team. Their main story began this way:

Beside the pool, a man lay shot to death, draped over a blue lounge chair. At the rear of the hotel, near the employees' entrance, lay two more bodies, sprawled in front of a minivan. In the hotel's lobby, near the registration desk, was another body. Elsewhere in the hotel were three more people, shot but still alive.

The stunning scene unfolded in the space of just a few minutes Thursday afternoon at the Radisson Bay Harbor Hotel on Courtney Campbell Parkway.

The dead and the injured were all hotel workers—and so was the gunman, Tampa police said. They identified him as Silvio Izquierdo-Leyva, a 36-year-old refugee from Cuba who had worked at the hotel for only a couple of months.

A fifth person would die before one of Tampa's most tragic days was over...

What had set off the killings? There was no clear answer to that question late Thursday.

To answer readers' questions about the suspect, the *Times* provided a vivid portrait, drawn largely from reporter Kathryn Wexler's exclusive interviews with his nieces. Wexler tracked them down with the help of news researcher John Martin, but she still had to persuade the young women to share what they knew about their uncle.

"I found that it was very important to create a sort of comfort zone for the people I was interviewing," Wexler said. "People who have been touched by tragedy, who

have even peripherally been involved in a crime, are often loathe to talk to reporters, and I found myself talking my way into the home of one of the shooter's nieces and then sitting with her and her friend—basically sitting in their living room for about 45 minutes, letting them get used to my presence before I whipped out my notebook, before I started asking questions, just sort of asking how they were, and hoping that with time they would be willing to share some of the shooter's life with me. And it took a while, but they did."

Lesson Four: Care about the subject.

Another Georgian, Cynthia Tucker of *The Atlanta Constitution*, is this year's commentary winner. She challenged her readers with provocative and thoughtful columns that got tough on Jesse Jackson when he visited Belgrade and on the family of Martin Luther King Jr. allying itself with a politician of questionable honesty. One column also gave this reality check to the formerly white-only reunion of Thomas Jefferson's descendants.

As a veteran of family reunions, I can tell you they are often fractious affairs. Folks get their feelings hurt.

"Uncle Junebug hasn't spoken to Uncle Pink in 32 years, and he isn't about to talk to the stubborn old fool now. So who sat the two together at the banquet table? Aunt Lillie Bell never did care for Aunt Coot's sweet potato pie, and she never tires of telling her so. So how did the two of them end up in the kitchen together? The descendants of old Jim Tucker have felt slighted for decades by the descendants of old Jack Tucker—a bossy, elitist crowd. So who allowed Jack's clan to substitute a museum trip for the traditional fish fry and casino night?"

Given my experience with these affairs, I've got a little advice for the members of the Monticello Association: If the first gathering of the black and white descendants of Thomas Jefferson doesn't go all that smoothly, don't give up on it. You're just acting like family.

Tucker said her most important lesson was the value of writing about topics about which "I have some pas-

sion and which I know well. In that particular case, I also wanted just to try a different approach. Lots and lots and lots had been written about Thomas Jefferson and the fact that there was this new evidence that, in fact, he had had an affair with Sally Hemings. I had written about it before. But I wanted to approach it in a way that was a little different, a little more humorous, and to approach it in a way that would draw in readers whose point of view might be a little bit different from my own. I'm a Southerner. I know, needless to say, how race is part and parcel of the fabric of the South. I also know family very well. And so it was easy for me to cast it as any ordinary family gathering. In that sense it was a subject that I knew very well.

"Notice I didn't say write about what you know or what you care about. It is nice when you are familiar with a topic. But as we all know, the reporter doesn't have the same freedom as a columnist. Although I guess you could try it. 'Boss, I don't think I'm going to cover that City Council meeting on the new enterprise zone. I don't really know enough about it.'

"We should get smart about a topic as quickly as we can, but in the interim at least we should bring some passion to it. I don't mean bias. In fact, the best passion is that which reflects someone else's fire. Find out why that enterprise zone matters. To the people who want it or don't. If you don't know why people care, then why would anybody care to read your story?"

Lesson Five: Have a conversation with the reader.

Dianne Donovan of the *Chicago Tribune* won this year's editorial award. She won it for well-reasoned, elegant, and graceful editorials on everything from blue moons to a new work by Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*. She also campaigned about the absurdity of reading Miranda rights to a child. One of her pieces began this way:

Okay, quick: What does "counsel" mean? How about "waive," or "consult"? What's an "attorney"?

Maybe you're not stumped. But maybe you're not 9 years old. And maybe it's not after midnight and you haven't been sitting alone in a room half the night.

It is foolish to think that any 9-year-old child, even a well-rested one, could comprehend the meaning of the Miranda warning explaining his rights to remain silent and to have a lawyer present while he is interrogated by police. And it is absurd to think he could understand those rights well enough to voluntarily relinquish them.

For Dianne Donovan, the lesson learned was this: "When you are writing editorials, it's more important to talk with the reader as if you're in a conversation rather than finger wagging or preaching or being overly didactic, as editorial writers love to be." The challenge with this editorial, she said, was how to make the reader understand the sheer absurdity of it. "I just decided not to overcomplicate the thing and not to get too involved with the legal ins and outs, but just as you would sitting down with your friends or family saying, 'This is goofy. How could a kid understand this?'" And I got a copy of the Miranda warning, which I'd been writing about for a while but which I'd never actually sat down and read, and just with that in front of me, the absurdity became so clear. And so I just wrote it in what I hoped was an uncomplicated fashion, just simplifying the argument, and using the whole notion of imagine this kid and how absurd it would be for someone to expect him to understand what waiving his constitutional right is. And I think that's a good lesson for most editorials—that is don't overcomplicate them. Talk to your reader as if you were talking with someone in the same room with you, and it usually gets the point across."

Lesson Six: Talk with your editor.

Michael Dobie of *Newsday* challenged stereotypes about race and sports in a series that examined how athletics can help ethically and racially diverse players form close relationships, yet it can't keep them from wondering how long these relationships will last once the game is over. He's the winner of this year's special award for coverage of diversity. He begins one part this way:

Todd Johnson says he knows the deal. He's a good player. Then again, he has to be.

Because he is black. Because the sport is basketball. Because the Glen Cove High School star

knows what would happen if he couldn't cut it on the court. If he lost his starting spot to a white kid, for example.

"I'd be the talk of the town. My teammates, the people who played with me before would be, like, 'Dang, you don't know how to play no more? What happened?'" Johnson said.

Sports can bring kids together. It can also pull them apart by feeding the misconception that race predetermines what athletes can or cannot do.

Blacks are good in basketball. White men can't jump.

Such phrases often are uttered without second thought—or any thought. For players such as Johnson, these labels can hurt in unexpected ways. Stereotypes create expectations. Expectations create pressure....

The message, Johnson says, is clear:

Excel, or you're a failure.

Michael Dobie is a sportswriter. He spends a lot of time on the road or working from his home. "And it's something that's worked very well for me in the past, whether we're talking about a short feature or a longer feature, or even a major project. I've done several of those and mostly worked by myself." This time, however, he learned the value of working with an editor. "And I also discovered that once we did start to get a regular dialogue going, there were things that I hadn't thought of at all that seemed second-nature to him. That's what happens sometimes in projects like this, and it's nice to have another set of eyes to cut through that and help you see more clearly where we were going. So I think the need for constant and early communication throughout a project is something that really came home to me in this one."

Six stories. Six lessons. And I can guarantee you that each writer learned more than the one I've mentioned. Some of them may seem rather simple. But remember the lesson of Occam's Razor: Simple is good. Many years ago, when I was a young kid dreaming of being a writer, I got to meet a real writer, one who'd actually published. I asked her if she'd tell me how to become a writer. Sure, she said. "First, you've got to read. Read