

# What's Happening

I N T H E U S A ?

BY LAWRENCE GABLE

VOL 25, NO 10 JUNE 2018

## The Pulitzer Prizes Break New Ground

The Pulitzer Prize is America's most prestigious award. Every April the Pulitzer Prize Board announces the winners in the fields of Journalism, Letters, Drama and Music. For 2018 the Pulitzer Prize Board surprised everyone with its selection for Music. For the first time ever it bestowed the prize on a hip-hop artist.

The prize takes its name from Joseph Pulitzer. He was born in Hungary in 1847 and emigrated to the United States at age 17. After a few years he became a journalist for a newspaper in St. Louis. By age 24 he was its editor and part owner. Eight years later he bought a newspaper, the *New York World*, in New York City and turned it into the country's largest newspaper. Under Mr. Pulitzer its circulation grew from 15,000 to 600,000.

Joseph Pulitzer died a wealthy man in 1911. He left \$2 million to Columbia University in New York City. That was enough for the university to found a School of Journalism a year later. Mr. Pulitzer's will also stipulated that it use the money to establish the annual prizes that now bear his name. He intended them to become an incentive to excellence.

The first prizes were awarded in 1917. According to Mr. Pulitzer's wishes, there were awards in Journalism, Literature and Drama. Since that time the Board has expanded the number of categories and prizes. As far back as 1922 the Board began awarding prizes to cartoonists. In 2017 the Board began accepting entries from magazines too, including online publications. Now there are prizes in 21 categories, 14 of which are in Journalism. The other seven go to winners in Fiction, Drama, History, Biography, Poetry, Nonfiction and Music.

Newspapers, magazines, authors, playwrights, poets and musicians submit a piece of their work. Juries for the various categories then send their nominations to the Board, whose 19 members select the winners. Columbia University awards the prizes. The news organization that wins the Public Service prize receives

a gold medal. The winners in the other 20 categories receive \$15,000 cash and a certificate.

The Pulitzer Prize for Music began in 1943. For many years the prize always went to composers of classical music. Over those years, though, the Board received criticism for not recognizing great American jazz composers like George Gershwin and Duke Ellington. In 1996 the Board changed its criteria, and the next year awarded the prize to a jazz musician, Wynton Marsalis. There have been only two more jazz winners since then.

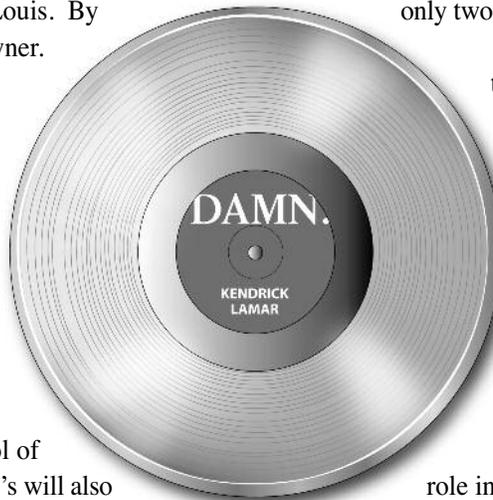
There is a five-person jury for the Pulitzer Prize in Music. In 2018 it received just more than 100 entries, and it sent three nominees to the Board. Two of them were young composers of classical music. The jury's third nominee was Kendrick Lamar for his album "DAMN." The 30-year-old from Compton, California, is the first hip-hop artist ever to receive the Pulitzer Prize.

Commercial success plays no role in selecting the winners of Pulitzer Prizes.

They seldom go to artists for their bestselling novels, plays on Broadway, or music that reached the top of the charts. Instead they recognize the makers of excellent works that have gone largely unnoticed. That is part of the surprise in the selection of Mr. Lamar. "DAMN." was the best-selling hip-hop album of 2017.

The jury praised Mr. Lamar for capturing "the complexity of modern African-American life." In his songs Mr. Lamar addresses personal issues like race, faith and success. In addition to that, his lyrics deal honestly with the violence, poverty and racism that Blacks experience in America.

Winning the Pulitzer Prize is nice for Mr. Lamar, but he does not need it to boost his career. Nor does he need \$15,000. The real significance of the award is that it elevates the place of the popular Black voice. The Pulitzer Prizes honor creative expression that pushes Americans to consider new ideas and perspectives. When Mr. Lamar receives his award in May, it will be as big a moment for the Pulitzer Prize Board as for the artist himself.



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The prize takes its name from Joseph Pulitzer. He was born in Hungary in 1847 and emigrated to the United States at age 17. He became a journalist for a newspaper in St. Louis. By age 24 he was its editor and part owner. Eight years later he bought a newspaper in New York City and made it the largest in the country.

Joseph Pulitzer died a wealthy man in 1911. He left \$2 million to Columbia University in New York City. He wanted the university to begin a School of Journalism, and to give out annual prizes. He intended them to become an incentive to excellence.

The first prizes in 1917 were for Journalism, Literature and Drama. Since that time the Board has expanded the prizes. Soon the Board began awarding prizes to cartoonists. In 2017 the Board began accepting entries from magazines too, including online publications. Now there are 14 prizes in Journalism. The other seven go to winners in Fiction, Drama, History, Biography, Poetry, Nonfiction and Music.

Newspapers, magazines, authors, playwrights, poets and musicians submit a piece of their work. Juries for each category send their nominations to the Board, which selects the winners. Columbia University awards the prizes. The winners receive \$15,000 cash.

The Pulitzer Prize for Music began in 1943.

For many years the prize went only to composers of classical music. The Board received criticism for not recognizing great American jazz composers. Finally in 1997 the Board awarded the prize to a jazz musician, Wynton Marsalis. There have been only two more jazz winners since then.

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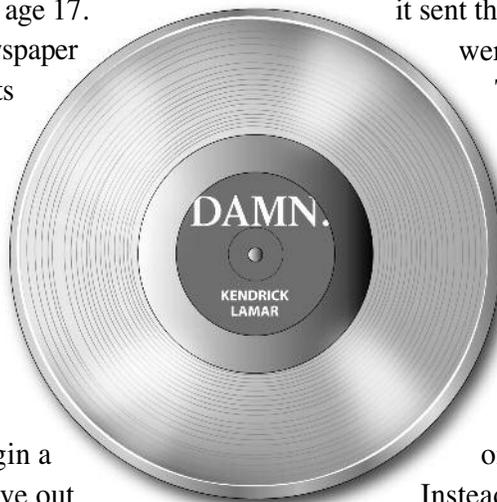
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Instead they recognize the makers of excellent works that have gone largely unnoticed. That is part of the surprise in the selection of Mr. Lamar. "DAMN." was the best-selling hip-hop album of 2017.

The jury praised Mr. Lamar for capturing "the complexity of modern African-American life." In his songs Mr. Lamar addresses personal issues like race, faith and success. In addition, his lyrics deal with the violence, poverty and racism that Blacks experience in America.

The Pulitzer Prize is nice for Mr. Lamar, but he does not need it to boost his career. Nor does he need \$15,000. Its real significance is that it recognizes the popular Black voice. The Pulitzer Prizes try to push Americans to consider new ideas and perspectives. When Mr. Lamar receives his award in May, it will be as big a moment for the Pulitzer Prize Board as for the artist himself.



# Background Information

Joseph Pulitzer was the first person to call for the training of journalists at the university level.

In 1947 the U.S. Postal Service issued a commemorative stamp of Joseph Pulitzer on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

The Pulitzer juries for the various categories received 2,400 entries for the 2018 prizes. Every year the juries read and listen to music all through the fall and summer. The Board deliberates over the nominations for two days.

Only U.S. citizens may apply for the Pulitzer Prizes in Letters, Drama and Music. For History the book must be a history of the U.S., but the author may be of any nationality. For Journalism applicants may be of any nationality, but work must have appeared in a U.S. newspaper, magazine or news site that publishes regularly.

The definition of the prize for Music says it must be a “distinguished musical composition by an American that has had its first performance or recording in the United States during the year.”

The Board has the option of naming no winner in any category. Four times it has chosen not to award a prize for Music.

“DAMN.,” Mr. Lamar’s fourth LP, was his third straight to be nominated for a Grammy Award. He performed during halftime at the 2018 college football national championship game.

Mr. Lamar produced the soundtrack for the recent movie “Black Panther.”

The first recognition of hip-hop came in the Drama category for the play “Hamilton” in 2016.

The Pulitzer’s gold medal never goes to an individual. It goes to the American news organization that wins the Public Service category. One side of the medal displays Benjamin Franklin. The other side shows a bare-chested printer at work.

Mr. Pulitzer’s endowment pays for five scholarships of \$7,500 every year for graduating students from Columbia’s School of Journalism.

The 2018 winner in Breaking News Photography was the image of a car driving into crowd of protesters in Charlottesville, Virginia.

## Topics for Discussion and Writing

*Pre-reading:*

- Tell what you know about hip-hop music, including the names of performers and the nature of their songs.

*Comprehension:*

- Explain why this year’s Pulitzer Prize for Music is a surprise.

*Beyond the Text:*

- Describe how you and your family get news and learn about what is going on in the world.
- Mr. Pulitzer said, “Our Republic and its press will rise or fall together.” Why is a free press important in a democracy?
- Use the library or Internet to learn about the Black Lives Matter Movement’s goals.

## Vocabulary (\*advanced article only)

*Article-specific:* prestigious; board; Letters; to bestow on\*; will\*; nomination; certificate\*; composer; classical music; jury; Broadway; charts

*High-use:* to emigrate to; editor; circulation\*; to found\*; to stipulate\*; to bear\*; to intend; incentive; to expand; annual; publication; category; to submit; criteria\*; commercial; complexity; significance; to elevate\*; perspective

## Sources

*The Guardian* April 22, 2018

*The Atlantic* April 21, 2018

*The Economist* April 20, 2018

National Public Radio “The Record” April 19, 2018

*New York Times* April 18, 17, 16, 2018

*Billboard* April 16, 2018

The Pulitzer Prizes [www.pulitzer.org](http://www.pulitzer.org)

## Common Core Curricular Standards

### Reading — Grades 5–12

- Quote accurately from text
- Cite textual evidence
- Draw inferences
- Determine central ideas
- Analyze structure of text
- Interpret words and phrases