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July 12, 2017

Mike Pride
Administrator, The Pulitzer Prizes
Columbia University
709 Pulitzer Hall
2950 Broadway
New York, N.Y. 10027

Dear Mr. Pride:

On behalf of Biographers International Organization (BIO), the world's only professional organization in the genre of biography, in consultation with our Advisory Council, we are writing to express our strong belief that a change is needed in the category designations related to the Pulitzer Prize for "Biography or Autobiography"—one of Joseph Pulitzer's original categories in what is now the Letters, Arts & Music awards group.

We are concerned that the prize has, in recent years, been used to honor works in the entirely different genre of memoir. We urge the Pulitzer board to recognize the important differences that have evolved between these three genres over the last generation, and, specifically, strongly suggest separating biography from autobiography, while creating a new category for autobiography/memoir.

Reviewing the history of the Pulitzer Prize—it appears the last time a new category was added to Arts & Letters was 1962—we understand that the Board may not take such a suggestion lightly. However, an assessment of the award-winning books and finalists in the Biography & Autobiography category points to an increasing prominence for memoirs—a genre so vastly different from biography that, we believe, it is more appropriate to create an entirely new category dedicated to autobiography/memoir.

When it comes to these genres in particular, context really matters. Currently, the Pulitzer Prize for biography is awarded to a distinguished biography or autobiography by an American author. The distinction between these two, however, is critical—and thus, we believe, entirely deserving of separate categories. Biography is a meticulous narrative of a person's life, not written by the subject, and may utilize a wide variety of approaches, whether it's detailing an entire life ("cradle to grave"), a portion of a life, multiple lives, or another creative approach. Regardless of methodology, a key aspect of a biography is an accurate and carefully documented sourcing and contextualization of the life, utilizing and citing a wide variety of documents and viewpoints. The scholarly dimension is essential.

An autobiography, on the other hand, is a chronological account of the author's life, based on the writer's memory, written with or without documentation based on letters, diaries, and other sources. An autobiography focuses mainly on the subject and only secondarily on other figures in the person's life. In the same vein, a memoir has a narrower, more intimate focus on the writer's own memories, feelings, and emotions.

While an autobiography is usually a record of accomplishment, written by someone who has achieved renown in his or her spheres of influence, a memoir recreates an intimate, personal experience—usually, a selected aspect of the life of the writer, who may be famous or completely unknown.

Until the late 20th century memoirs were a relatively rare genre, and thus played little role in the judgments of the Pulitzer jurists. When they were submitted for consideration, they were few enough that they were easily subsumed under the category of autobiography. In the last four decades, however, a number of factors – the emergence of reality TV shows, social networking, a new emphasis on the lives of “marginalized” individuals, increased public awareness of behaviors once kept under wraps, and highly personal confessional essays in major media -- have all contributed to the rise of the memoir genre. The boom in formal writing programs has also encouraged the growth of memoir as a separate genre, in which aspiring writers are taught to adapt the techniques of fiction to craft books that blend memory and imagination, with little or no emphasis on verifiable factual accuracy or historical context.

When the Pulitzer Prize was first created, autobiography and biography were generally distinguished, by both readers and jurists, by the name of the author rather than technique. Now that memoir has become such a dominant literary genre, in both numbers and cultural influence, readers have developed very different expectations of a biography versus a life story written by the person who lived it, regardless of whether it is called autobiography or memoir.

For that reason, we suggest that autobiography and memoir be reviewed and judged in relation with each other, ideally in the same category. Further, we believe, given the recent advances in the documentation, sourcing and style of biographies, that biographies should be considered on their own merits.

We respectfully request, then, that the Pulitzer Board:

- (1) review the recent history of the prize for “Biography or Autobiography”;
- (2) consider biographies on their own merits and thus as their own unique prize category; and
- (3) consolidate autobiography and memoir into a new and distinct category.

We believe providing biography and autobiography/memoir with their own prize categories would more accurately reflect the evolution of these distinct art forms over the last hundred years, and would be entirely consistent with Joseph Pulitzer’s intent that “changes, or substitutions shall be conducive to the public good or rendered advisable by public necessities, or by reason of change of time.”

We would be honored to work with the board to make this distinction possible, and thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Will Swift
President
Biographers International Organization

Debby Applegate
Chair
BIO Advisory Committee