



Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power

James McGrath Morris

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This epic biography, with its remarkable new research and vivid, fast-paced writing, will delight anyone who wants to understand the tangled history of politics and the press in modern America.” —Debby Applegate, author of *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*

“James McGrath Morris has given us everything we could have asked for in his new biography of Joseph Pulitzer. Gracefully written and thoroughly researched, his biography is easily the best we have on this remarkable man who so profoundly influenced the worlds of politics and publishing.” — David Nasaw, author of *Andrew Carnegie*

Pulitzer is James McGrath Morris’s definitive biography of the Jewish Hungarian immigrant who created the modern American mass media—the first comprehensive biography of this remarkable historical icon in more than 40 years.

Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power Details

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From Reader Review Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power for online ebook

Billy Collins says

With having the time to write a full review, McGrath treats Pulitzer with the objectivity consistent with more modern, Western associations of journalism. Pulitzer, unlike the figures of most biographical treatments, is not the hero. He is, however, the unmistakable protagonist (of course). McGrath excels in developing the relationship between Pulitzer and his family, his two newspapers, his personal assistants, and details quite well the interplay between he and William Randolph Hearst. The most notable of McGrath's reflections comes as he artfully works Pulitzer's mental and physical afflictions into each aspect of the giant's life.

Louise says

While James McGrath Morris is somewhat like a first time author, this volume ranks with the work of Ron Chernow, David McCullough, and H.W. Brands. I do not believe there is a more complete work on Pulitzer. Besides the life of Pulitzer the parallel story, a history of modern journalism runs through this biography.

Morris traces Joseph Pulitzer from his roots in Hungary to his arrival in the US as a Civil War conscript through his career in the dual arts of journalism and politics. He is a hard driver of himself and others. Pulitzer is impossible to work for, be related to or be around in general. His generosity and concern for the common man stand in contrast to the many stories that illustrate his lack of consideration for others. As he aged, the emotional cruelty he dished out seemed to intensify. As he became wealthy, he became more sympathetic to the needs of business.

Pulitzer's relationship with his brother Albert certainly raised my curiosity. Here are two brothers, both arriving separately in the US not speaking English, and both independently (of each other) establishing successful English language newspapers. Joseph's treatment of his brother, like his treatment of almost everyone else, is abominable. Hopefully, someone, maybe Morris, will produce a book on this relationship alone.

The chapter on TR Roosevelt and the Canal Zone was fascinating. A movie could be made on this episode alone with wonderful espionage scenes in Panama and Colombia. Roosevelt was wrong to use the apparatus of government to prosecute, but the newspaper (and perhaps Pulitzer) was equally wrong to hammer away on unsubstantiated charges. In this instance, Pulitzer finally met his match.

Through Pulitzer's story you see both the power and limitations of the press. It is clear that it is not the pen that is mightier than the sword, but the ownership of that pen and the apparatus to distribute the writing. You also see the limitations of this power. Pulitzer could get his candidates elected but not always, and his editorials could only make a deciding factor in close elections. He had to worry about competition and as today, he withheld stories when he felt they would spur the ire of someone important to his business or as in the period of the Canal related litigation, legal concerns.

The story is huge and Morris delivers it at a good pace. It was hard to remember all the reappearing journalists and editors, but the good index helped.

I highly recommend this book for readers of biography and history. I'd like to see it nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

Peter Pactor says

Pulitzer is an interesting book, but no so interesting that you couldn't put it down. It was also not so tedious that you would put it down to seek another book to read.

The information in the book was valuable and opened up some areas of study that I now want to pursue further.

The problem for me was that it didn't seem that the author had any passion, positive or negative, for his subject. The pursuit of Pulitzer's life was as if it were performed in a laboratory examining a bug under the microscope.

And yet, if you have a love for history, if you are interested in the history of the United States from 1850 to the early 1900s—especially during this great age of newspapers—you will find this a book well worth the reading.

John says

Having taken a journalism history course in college I thought I was knowledgeable about Pulitzer. Didn't know about his dark side. What I studied was that he was an innovative editor who played human interest news to the hilt. Once he'd caught reader interest he led them to think. The World in New York City during his time was the leading "must read" political newspaper and widely quoted throughout the nation, just as the New York Times is today. Later in life he became less admirable. As a miserable and self-absorbed blind man with real and imagined ailments, he was insensitive to suffering of others. Editors and reporters quit because they couldn't tolerate his eccentric management style. His paper declined in influence and became stodgy. His wife put up with his cantankerousness by mostly living apart from him. Though his children held him in affection they were mostly alienated.

Amy says

Interesting look at someone who influenced journalism, but all most of us know about him is the yellow journalism and helping Hearst to start the Spanish American war with the sinking of the Maine. This goes far beyond that, digging into his childhood in Hungary and his life as a Jewish millionaire in turn of the century New York. While there were some slow portions, the look at his early life and young manhood was outstanding read.

Bonnie says

This long and fascinating biography about a strange and powerful man is well worth reading for the historical context. Pulitzer had a lot to do with the development of what we now experience as modern media, and that's not a compliment. It was thought he set up the Pulitzer Prize and the first university School of Journalism to atone for his egregious behavior as a newspaperman. Later in life, blind, neurotic and mostly alone, he had some perspective on his actions, though he never gave up his controlling tendencies in his own life. Here are some quotes:

"Our republic and its press will rise or fall together."

"An able, disinterested, public-spirited press, with trained intelligence to know the right and courage to do it, can preserve that public virtue without which popular government is a shame and a mockery. A cynical, mercenary, demagogic press will produce in time a people as base as itself."

Todd Thompson says

The role of the press as an independent, critical, and forceful power in a free society was the crowning accomplishment of Joseph Pulitzer. James McGrath Morris' biography of Pulitzer, published in 2010, tells of the subject's humble beginnings as a Jewish immigrant to the United States and one of his first jobs as a reporter. Fascinated with stories of local government and the corrupting influence of money, Joseph Pulitzer applied his raw, inquisitive talent, always asking a few more probing questions and generally creating discomfort for those in power.

After years of hard work, and developing a keen eye for politics and the power of the written word to influence the actions of politicians as well as the electorate, Pulitzer built an influential empire in the publishing world. Morris tells dozens of highly detailed stories of his interactions with presidents, candidates, civic leaders, and other publishers.

The last two decades of Pulitzer's life were spent in poor health, a depressive state of mind, and almost total blindness. The years were also spent aboard his yachts and in European homes, separated from his family. Morris points out the bitterness in his life toward his family, really one of self-pity. While his mental and physical health were seriously compromised, he continued to maintain control of his *World* newspaper in New York.

Driven equally by a genuine belief in the freedom and power of the press and a unquenchable ambition, Pulitzer's life was both a triumph and a tragedy. Morris deftly illustrates both in this 500+ page biography of one of the most important influences at the turn of the 20th century. Highly recommended.

Liedzeit says

Hungarian young Pulitzer comes penniless to America. He came to fight in the Civil War, that bought his passage. After the war he found himself in St. Louis where he found a job in one of the many German

newspapers. His first coup consisted in buying a paper and selling it a week later making some nice profit. The trick was that the dead paper had access to a news agency the paper he sold the acquired one did not. Eventually he became a publisher, first with St. Louis Post-Dispatch than in New York with the New York World (bought from Jay Gould). This would, of course, become the most successful paper ever. Funny, that his younger brother, who committed suicide later on, also became a publisher, founding the Journal that later was to become the rival paper to the World under Hearst. Interesting war between these two guys. In the course of the war price of paper would be reduced to 1 cent for example. And other papers, like struggling New York Times had to cut prices as well.

Pulitzer was also a politician for a while. His political enemy was Roosevelt. Became blind early in life.

Spent most on his later years on board of gigantic yacht. Liberty.

The prize is dedicated to a daughter.

Alex says

For most Americans--even journalists--Joseph Pulitzer is mostly remembered as the guy who founded the Pulitzer Prizes. Oddly enough, that's kind of how he wanted it. The Prizes were his bid for immortality, even as his associates begged him to focus on making his newspaper, the New York World, his legacy. But the World went defunct not long after Pulitzer's death, whereas the Pulitzer Prizes and Columbia University's premiere journalism school -- which he also created -- remain as strong as ever.

James McGrath Morris, the author of Pulitzer's new biography, clearly feels that Pulitzer is underappreciated. If people remember him at all, it's normally in the same breath as William Randolph Hearst and other purveyors of yellow journalism. "Pulitzer: A life in Politics, Print, and Power" is hardly a love letter -- it clearly demonstrates just how ruthless his methods could be, at times. But in his telling, it's also hard not to find a sneaking admiration for the self-made millionaire, whose life reads like an almost perfect example of the American Dream. An Austrian Jew who came to New York almost literally penniless, Pulitzer made a fortune through his ferocious intelligence and incredible drive -- and not by drilling oil or forging steel, but by busting corruption and giving working class readers a voice. The whole story is considerably less rosy than that summary, but it's hard not to get enthralled with the story of how Pulitzer revolutionized the media.

Despite his almost ridiculous money-making skills, Pulitzer always saw the business side as a way to influence politics, not the other way around. He wanted to be a kingmaker, not a business titan. In that way, he's probably very similar to Roger Ailes. Pulitzer helped transform newspapers from partisan mouthpieces to a force to be reckoned with on their own. The Republican-turned-Democrat, who held public office twice, (as a Missouri state legislator and as a New York congressman), he was obsessed with politics, and had a keen understanding of how people vote. Perhaps the best example of his king-making ability was when he helped turn an quip made by a minister at a political rally -- "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" -- into an election-swinging slur. It may have been the first political "gotcha!" moment in American history.

And then, of course, if you've seen Citizen Kane--(which was sort of an amalgam of both Pulitzer and Hearst's life)--you know the irony of the man who makes a fortune battling rich elitists, only to find himself among their ranks as well. Despite his humble origins, Pulitzer yearned to live with the upper crust, even as he attacked them with a ferocity that was unprecedented. The disconnect left him alienated and friendless, and as he eventually went blind and became increasingly neurotic, he lost touch with family and dozens of proteges he tried (unsuccessfully) to groom as successors. Although he had a taste for sensationalism, Morris argues that it was only pressure from Hearst that forced him into the yellow journalism which has tarred his legacy. (Morris portrays Hearst as a copycat who used his unlimited family fortune to beat Pulitzer at his

own game, for a while--although it's probably good to read David Nasaw's *The Chief: The Life of William Randolph Hearst* before drawing any conclusions about him.) Ironically enough, unlike William "I'll furnish the War*" Hearst, Pulitzer was somewhat of a peacenik, who railed against what he saw as growing American militarism and imperialism, especially when his arch-nemesis Theodore Roosevelt was in the White House.

The book not only captures Pulitzer's life, but also the rollicking era of journalism, when newspapers were hyper-partisan and sarcastically vicious--a lot like today's bloggers. Pulitzer didn't invent this, but he was one of its masters and took it to new heights. A great read for anyone interested in American history.

*Which Hearst probably never said.

Marieke says

Finally I finished this! I'm torn between 4 and 5 stars...this took me longer than i had intended and kept me from other reading i need/want to be doing, but i don't regret a single moment i spent with this book.

I put it on my "impulse-buy" shelf, but i didn't buy it. I took it impulsively from the library. and then renewed it twice without starting it. Thinking i would finish it within a week, i really procrastinated. Two days before it was originally due (no more renewals), i still had half the book to read. So i have read nothing else but this book since Thursday. I was supposed to return it yesterday, but when I logged into my library account online, i saw a message that extended my loan period to tomorrow because of snow days in the past week that closed the county government. yay! so i've finished it without rushing *too* much AND i won't have any fines to pay.

I really thought it was excellent; very readable for people interested in politics and the legislative process. Pulitzer was very engaged in the political process, which i had not been aware of. Also, the author did a fantastic job of creating an engaging tension throughout the book, despite very repetitive themes in Pulitzer's life--medical ailments, travels around the world, emotional abuse of his family--that could have become very tiresome.

Pulitzer lived in a very interesting time, so I learned (or was reminded of events i once learned about in school) a lot about American history during a certain time period and got to see how professional journalism developed in that time. Pulitzer immigrated to the U.S. from Hungary just in time to fight in the Civil War on the Union side. His experiences as an immigrant from a monarchical empire and as a soldier in the Civil War affected his political views deeply. Initially he joined the Republican party, which was experiencing some internal fractiousness--split between Radicals and Liberals--but later joined the Democratic party and supported the Labor movement (although at times that support was questionable). He died just three years before World War 1 broke out.

Pulitzer believed strongly that a newspaper's job was to keep tabs on political forces; the dynamic was fascinating. In fact, the book opens and closes with the story of the acrimony that existed between Pulitzer and Theodore Roosevelt and the libel case that Roosevelt tried to develop against Pulitzer's *World* newspaper during his presidency.

I won't say anything more. Except maybe, that Pulitzer was a very strange man.

The Book Studio says

Watch Bethanne Patrick interview James McGrath Morris about his book "Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print, and Power" on The Book Studio.

Vincent says

This book was a big long but fascinating and filled with great details about the man who created modern journalism.

It covers his early days as a Hungarian Jew, watching his father die of TB and losing eight siblings. He came to Boston, ended up serving in the Civil War after enlisting at Harpers Ferry WVA and moved to St Louis where his career as a newspaper man started.

He wrote for a German language paper and became known for his crusades against government waste - for example attacking cost overruns at a mental asylum.

He was a Republican but very progressive and later became a member of the state assembly - using his paper to blatantly advocate for his issues.

In the late 1800's, Pulitzer built a new headquarters for his paper, New York World, that at 13 stories was the tallest building in the city.

So when immigrants arrived in NYC, the first thing they saw was a golden dome atop a skyscraper filled with newspapermen. Hard to imagine.

Steve says

Wednesday, 24 Feb 2010. Learned about this book from Jeffrey Brown's interview with the author on the PBS NewsHour.

Blog on Books says

Given last week's awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes (congratulations New York Times and Washington Post), now seemed like a good time to look deeper into the life of the award's namesake, Joseph Pulitzer.

We begin by pointing out that there has not been a complete biography published on the turn-of-the-century media scion in nearly forty years. That is, until the recent release of James McGrath Morris' new book 'Pulitzer: A Life in Politics, Print and Power.' (Harper). (A book, much like Walter Issakson's 'Einstein,' that is at least partially the result of the discovery of a mass of new papers, in this case, discovered in the incestuous archives of Pulitzer's late brother, Albert.)

In it, Morris (an award winning biographer and editor of the publication 'The Biographer's Craft') covers the range of Pulitzer's life from his arrival as a Jewish Hungarian immigrant to America in 1864, to his early

days in St. Louis political circles to his 1878 purchase at auction of the St. Louis Evening Dispatch (which he later merged to form the region's Post-Dispatch), his eventual move to and creation of a New York power-base with the New York World, to his ultimate untimely bout with blindness and an eventual lonely death.

Along the way, Morris details the vast influences on Pulitzer's life, from the emergence of the industrial revolution, to his calls for political reform to his many run-ins with powerful political figures (even resulting in then President Teddy Roosevelt attempting to put Pulitzer in prison for his many anti-TR pontifications!) Eerily reminiscent of some of the media barons of today, Pulitzer was both an engaging activist and a sometimes pugnacious media lord (a precursor to the Murdochs and Turners of today's media world) though his ultimate demise much more closely resembles the life of another tormented recluse, Howard Hughes.

Either way, young journalists or even the prize winners themselves, would be well served by Morris' detailed account of a man who long ago forged the way for the Hearsts, Paleys, Luces and the other media moguls of the 20th century to do what they did in the name of journalist endeavor. And for all those who know little more than the name (much like, say, Alfred Nobel), 'Pulitzer' fills the gaps in an important piece of our domestic history.

Athena says

Update: one of the best books I've read in a long time. Pulitzer shaped this country with his sharp intelligence and insistence on journalistic independence. I highly recommend it to biography lovers and anyone who wants to understand that time in America's history.

I won a copy through First Reads and it arrived today! I've just started it, but so far it's an entertaining, informative read. Looking forward to more of the same.
