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Editor's Reflection

Celebrate the Power

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I was overloaded with excellent magazine stories. What could be better for a magazine junkie than to read outstanding journalism and spend two days in New York City helping to select the best of the best?

In early March magazine editors and academics from across the country gathered to select the print winners of the 2011 National Magazine Awards. The setting was familiar—a classroom at Pace University with rows of tables and a whiteboard. Our “instructor,” David Willey, the editor-in-chief of *Runner's World*, kept us “students” on task until we had selected six finalists, including the winner and an alternate. To go from 83 nominees to six finalists, the bar had to be high. “We’re here to honor great work,” Willey said, “not great entry forms.”

My group judged the public interest category. We discussed the quality of reporting and analysis. We looked for artwork that helped explicate an issue. We talked about an article’s potential to illuminate an issue and change policy.

Each pair of screening partners gave recommendations on the articles they had read beforehand—yes, no, or maybe.

NO: “Not ground-breaking.” “It went into incredible detail, but it never made me care.” “Writing is solid but not remarkable.” “So what? Isn’t this what Chicago politics is like?” “There’s no new thinking, no new science.” “It overpromises and under-delivers.” “The reporting wasn’t there, nor was the big picture.” “It doesn’t address bigger policies. Other pieces cover the same ground.” “A little Wikipedia-like.” “A gripping piece, but it doesn’t go far enough.” “It’s a long, well-reported bitch piece.” “Pointed a finger at a problem but didn’t suggest solutions.” “Seems gimmicky, more like a parlor game.”

MAYBE. “We’ll move it on because we need women’s perspective” (from two male screeners). “It’s two-star but not three-star.” “Doesn’t quite have the firepower of some others.” “It’s hard to get past the hyper-ventilating.” “What’s the takeaway?”

YES: “This defines public interest, especially for everyone who gets on a plane.” “Extra points for outrage.” “I came away caring about these people.” “Cool, beautiful package. All these injuries will make you ask questions if your kids play contact sports.” “It’s original, it’s reactive, it’s beautifully presented, it’s succinct.” “Gives you insight into Senate gridlock. Compelling. It had an impact in D.C.” “If you were always suspicious about chickens, this article will make you more paranoid, with numbers to back it up.”

After discussing the risks of contaminated chicken, we headed upstairs for a lunch of ... chicken wraps.

In the afternoon we winnowed 27 YES and MAYBE stories down to 13. That evening our homework was to read two of those stories.

The next morning we discussed the 13 in more detail. “The story rambles. The third part quotes the same people.” “It’s a beautiful read. It affects everyone. It holds you right through.” “It illuminated an important issue, but it didn’t answer a major question. The writing had a number of shortcomings.” “There’s both outrage and excitement in one piece.” “Both benefit from great packaging, but this one doesn’t add new understanding.”

We voted—six points for our top pick, five points for second place, and so forth.

We ate lunch. Chicken again.

We voted again. By early afternoon we had our six finalists.

The discussions over those two days in New York reminded me of the thoughtful deliberations that go into winnowing down the submissions to this journal. In the public service category we selected about 7 percent of the nominees for recognition. Over the past two years the acceptance rate for this journal has been about 33 percent.

Just as the National Magazine Awards depend on expert judges, this journal relies on expert reviewers. We extend our heartfelt thanks to those of you who have reviewed articles for this journal. Thank you all for contributing your time, expertise, and support.

The National Magazine Awards celebrate the power of magazines. The *Journal of Magazine & New Media Research* celebrates the power of scholarly research about magazines.