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2009 Science in Society Awards

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The winners of the 2009 Science in Society Journalism Awards, sponsored by the National Association of Science Writers, are: Alison Bass for her book "Side Effects: A Prosecutor, a Whistleblower, and a Bestselling Antidepressant on Trial" (Algonquin Books); Jason Felch and Maura Dolan for their *Los Angeles Times* series "Genes as Evidence"; Michael J. Berens and Ken Armstrong for their *Seattle Times* series "Culture of Resistance"; and Pamela Ronald for her commentary "The New Organic," which appeared on boston.com, the web site of the *Boston Globe*.

In addition, the judges awarded honorable mentions to Neil Shubin for his book "Your Inner Fish: A Journey into the 3.5-Billion-Year History of the Human Body" (Tyndale); Jeff Donn, Martha Mendoza, and Justin Pritchard for their Associated Press series "Pharma Water"; and David Goldston for his commentary "The Scientist Delusion," which appeared in the journal *Nature*.

The four winners each will receive a cash prize of \$2,500 at a reception on October 18, 2009, during NASW's ScienceWriters2009 meeting and workshop, which this year will be in Austin, Texas.

NASW established the Science in Society awards to provide recognition — without subsidy from any professional or commercial interest — for investigative or interpretive reporting about the sciences and their impact for good and bad. The awards are intended to encourage critical, probing work that would not receive an award from an interest group. Beginning with the first award in 1972, NASW has highlighted innovative reporting that goes well beyond the research findings and considers the associated ethical problems and social effects. The awards are especially prestigious because they are judged by accomplished peers. NASW currently awards prizes in four categories: books, science reporting, science reporting with a local or regional focus, and commentary or opinion.

- In "Side Effects," Alison Bass, an investigative journalist who has covered medicine, science, and technology for the *Boston Globe* and other publications, tells the story of how pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline systematically misled physicians and consumers about the safety and efficacy of Paxil, a popular antidepressant. "It's a very complicated issue, and the author conveyed this like a mystery story," said one of the judges, noting that, "Her investigations led to changes in policy in many areas of public health, not only nationally but internationally."
- Published between May and December, 2008, the five-part series "DNA: Genes as Evidence" by *Los Angeles Times* reporters Jason Felch and Maura Dolan revealed serious shortcomings in DNA-based forensic evidence. For example, they found that the FBI as well as crime labs across the country routinely exaggerate the odds against a coincidental match in "cold hit" cases. "Thanks to entertainment shows like CSI, people think of DNA evidence as absolutely precise and incontrovertible," said one of the judges. "What this series tries to tackle is how you introduce the concept of uncertainty into this type of evidence."
- Published in the *Seattle Times* in November 2008, the three-part series "Culture of Resistance" by reporters Michael J. Berens and Ken Armstrong provided the first comprehensive accounting of the spread of a drug-resistant germ called MRSA in hospitals in Washington state. In the face of stonewalling by sources, Berens and Armstrong used confidential documents and sophisticated analyses of multiple databases to determine that the number of patients treated for MRSA in Washington rose from 141 to 4,723 in just 10 years, resulting in 672 deaths that had been hidden from the public. The series resulted in new reporting requirements for hospitals, legislative efforts to improve protections for medical consumers, and expanded screening procedures at two large medical centers. "Although we're awarding for local coverage, I think this piece has also had a rather profound national impact as well," said one of the judges.
- In "The New Organic," which was published online by the *Boston Globe* on March 16, 2008, Pamela Ronald argues that resistance to genetic engineering by proponents of organic farming is driven more by technological anxiety than by science. Ronald, who is a professor of plant pathology at the University of California, Davis, and who is married to an organic farmer, argues that "this resistance hurts farmers, consumers, and the planet. Without the use of genetically engineered seed, the beneficial effects of organic farming . . . will likely remain small." The judges praised her "well structured arguments" that have the potential to "change the framework of the debate."

The final judging committee consisted of Dr. Esther Sternberg, a scientist at the National Institutes of Health, an author, and a physician; Sandra Blakeslee, a science correspondent for *The New York Times* and a book author; and Sharon Dunwoody, Evjue-Bascom Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The Science in Society awards committee was chaired by Robert Finn, San Francisco Bureau Chief for the International Medical News Group. In addition to the final committee, NASW thanks the volunteers who served on preliminary screening committees: Jill Adams

(freelance), Catherine Clabby (*American Scientist*), Pauline Davies (Arizona State University), Linda Doran (freelance), Robert Finn (International Medical News Group), Barbara Hyde (American Society for Microbiology), Doug Levy (University of California, San Francisco), Robin Lloyd (Imaginova Corp.), Merry Maisel (freelance), Margaret McDonald (University of Pittsburgh), Thomas Paulson (freelance), Neal Singer (Sandia National Laboratories), Rabiya Tuma (freelance), Cheryl Weinstock (freelance), and Mitch Zoler (International Medical News Group).

Entries for next year's competition, for material published or broadcast in 2009, are due February 1, 2010. Entry forms will be available at www.nasw.org by January 2010.

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