AAAS Kavli Science Journalism Award winners named

By Earl Lane

Stories on the social value of aging female killer whales, a frantic hunt for a meteorite in the Australian outback, and the unusual brain of the world’s greatest solo climber are among the winners of the 2017 AAAS Kavli Science Journalism Awards.

Judges also honored “Boomtown, Flood Town,” an ambitious online report by ProPublica and The Texas Tribune on the likelihood of fiercer rainstorms in the Houston area due to climate change and the impact of unmanaged growth on flood risk. The report was published more than eight months before Hurricane Harvey dumped torrential rain on Texas, with resulting catastrophic flooding. A Reuters team won the Gold Award for large newspapers for a series on the emergence of “superbug” infections and—in the absence of a unified national surveillance system—the failure of federal and state health authorities to adequately track such infections.

The science journalism awards, administered by AAAS since their inception in 1945, honor distinguished reporting for a general audience. Endowed by The Kavli Foundation, today the awards are an internationally recognized measure of excellence in science journalism. There were entries this year from 44 countries.

Victoria Gill and Andrew Luck-Baker of BBC Radio 4 won the Gold Award in the audio category for a story on menopause among killer whales and the role of sprightly matriarchs that can be seen breaching in the coastal waterways between British Columbia and Washington state. Robbie McEwan won the Silver Award in the same category for an Australian Broadcasting Corporation story on the search for a meteorite—about the size of a loaf of bread—that fell to Earth in the Australian outback.

J. B. MacKinnon, a Canadian freelancer for Nautilus, won the Silver Award in the magazine category for a piece exploring why Alex Honnold, who climbs towering rock walls without ropes or protective equipment, does not experience fear like the rest of us.

Independent panels of journalists select the winners. A Gold Award ($5,000) and a Silver Award ($3,500) are presented in each category. The winners will receive their awards at a 16 February ceremony held in conjunction with the 2018 AAAS Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas.

The journalism awards are among several AAAS efforts to encourage informed reporting on science, including the AAAS Mass Media Fellows program, science enrichment opportunities for religion writers, minority journalism internships with the Science news staff, and the recently launched SciLine, which provides journalists on deadline with access to credible experts.

The winners are:

Large Newspaper (Circulation of 150,000 or more) Gold Award: Ryan McNeill, Deborah J. Nelson, Yasmeen Abutaleb, and a Reuters team for “The Uncounted” (four-part series), Sept. 7, Nov. 18, Dec. 15, and Dec. 22, 2016.


Small Newspaper (Circulation less than 150,000) Gold Award: Sarah Wild, freelancer, Mail & Guardian (Johannesburg, South Africa), for “Long quest to understand these bodies without identities,” Jan. 13, 2017; “Bone specialists try to prise secrets from veld bodies,” Jan. 20, 2017; and “Unnamed, unclaimed—while families wait for their return,” Jan. 27, 2017.


Television Spot News/Feature Reporting (20 minutes or less) Gold Award: Melissa Hogenboom and Pierangelo Pirak, BBC Earth, for “Why there could be many identical copies of you,” Oct. 24, 2016.


Television In-Depth Reporting (more than 20 minutes) Gold Award: Catherine Ryan and Gary Weimberg, Luna Productions for PBS, for “My Love Affair with the Brain,” March 9, 2017.


Online Silver Award: Nick Neely, freelancer, High Country News, for “The West’s newest bird species has a beak like a crowbar,” July 12, 2017.

Children’s Science News Gold Award: Elizabeth Preston, freelancer, Ask magazine, for “A New Way to See,” September 2016.

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