



THE HUMAN LEAGUE

Rewarding writers for penning stories that enlighten and inspire
is all in a day's work for Humanitas

By Ann Donohue

Over the years, John Wells' stellar TV work — creating and executive producing such shows as "China Beach," "ER" and "The West Wing" — has embodied the tenets of the Humanitas organization, which rewards film and television writers who bring positive social messages to a broad audience. But it wasn't until 2005 that Wells finally took home the group's coveted prize, after six previous nominations.

Wells won the Humanitas Prize for a primetime, 60-minute program; it was an episode of "The West Wing" where President Bartlet was trying to get a negotiation going between the Palestinians and the Israelis. "It took place before Yasser Arafat had died," Wells says. "It was all about choosing talk over violence. There was a complicating factor in that when it would be easier to use force, sometimes it would be more responsible for someone not to use it."

Wells' episode serves as a concrete example of the lofty goals that the Humanitas Prize was developed to reward. Although founded by a

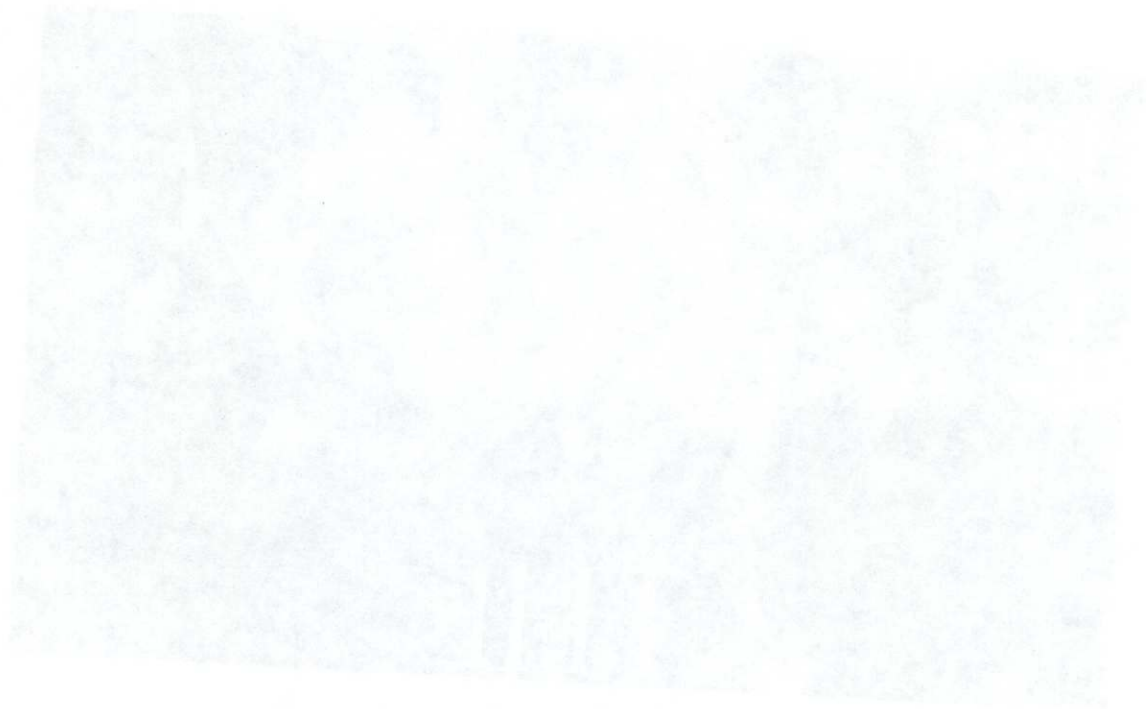
priest, the goal is to celebrate works that are decidedly humanistic instead of overtly religious, those that "affirm the dignity of the human person, probe the meaning of human life, enlighten the use of human freedom and reveal to each person the common humanity of every other person."

Founded in 1974, the Humanitas Prize was originally funded by the Lilly Endowment. The founder of the prize, Father Ellwood "Bud" Kieser, convinced the organization to give \$180,000 for three years. Kieser — who died in 2000 — once wrote that Fred Hofheinz, a former priest who worked with the endowment, suggested that the organization would "look very kindly upon any project that would foster primetime network programming that promotes human and Christian values. Come up with that kind of thing, and I can promise you a favorable hearing." Kieser famously went for a swim in the ocean when he came up with the idea to reward writers; Lilly bought the pitch and the Humanitas Prize was born.

Much has changed for the award in the 33 years since it was founded — the number of prizes has increased from just honoring writers of 30-minute, 60-minute and more than two-hour shows to a much more elaborate giving structure, with prizes that range from \$10,000 to \$25,000.

"Writers are the most successful export in America today, and yet A-list screenwriters feel undervalued and disrespected," says president Patric Verrone. "Humanitas provides a way for them to be recognized."

WIN CITY
Marshall Herskovitz, right, presents Davis Guggenheim with a 2006 Humanitas Prize for "An Inconvenient Truth."



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and money to fight that."

In the first year of submissions, 159 scripts were sent in for consideration. This year, there were 300 — and leading the way, as always, were submissions for 60-minute primetime, which consists of up to one-third of the total entries.

"Great scripts always have two things in common — stories with complex, layered characters," says Cathleen Young, executive director of Humanitas. "The backdrop can change, but that never does. Great stories stand out. It isn't difficult to find them. We have dozens of trustees who go through hundreds of submissions, and the great scripts rise to the top."

One source for honest, layered stories has long been HBO, which is probably why the network has amassed 10 Humanitas Prizes over the years. "Humanitas rewards writers who explore the complexities of the real world in a bold and truthful way," HBO president Colin Callender says. "Audiences know how complex the real world is. They live it every day. They can smell a fake. With Humanitas scripts, you always get the real thing."

The season to qualify for the Humanitas Prize runs from April 2 of one year to April 1 of the next year. (More information on submissions can be found at humanitasprize.org.)

The judging process begins almost immediately — and by early May, the board members and winners that comprise the committee are on their third and final round of decision-making.

"What that means is, the board of directors and the executive committee get the DVDs of everything that's a finalist," says Frank Desiderio, president of the board at Humanitas. "And then we have until the end of the month to see everything and talk about it. We usually have dinners for the people who are judging on the final round, and that way if people have issues they want to talk through about a particular show or about the general quality of the submission, we can do that as a group. But then we turn in our votes individually, and they're calculated anonymously and kept secret until the awards."

Desiderio wouldn't give hints about the themes prevalent in the submissions for 2007 — hey, he's a priest, what do you expect? — but he did mention that current events inevitably influence the topics that writers cover.

"I think after 9/11 we started seeing more and more stories about families and community coming together," he says. "I think 9/11 was in some ways a spiritual wake-up call, where people thought, 'I could be dead tomorrow, what's really important in my life?'"

And yes, Humanitas has lofty goals, but there also is a cash prize involved. Wells donated his \$15,000 prize back to the organization. Others have been more giddy with the use of the money; when David Milch won it for "NYPD Blue" in 1994, reportedly he used it to buy a racehorse.

Each category traditionally has had different levels of cash prizes, but inequity is in the process of coming to an end: "We plan to raise our prize

QUILL OF THE PEOPLE

The finalists for this year's Humanitas Prize

FEATURE FILM CATEGORY (\$25,000)

"Amazing Grace" (Samuel Goldwyn Films/Roadside Attractions)
Written by Steven Knight

"Freedom Writers" (Paramount Pictures)
Screenplay by Richard LaGravenese

"Venus" (Miramax)
Written by Hanif Kureishi

90-MINUTE CATEGORY (\$25,000)

"Longford" (HBO)
Written by Peter Morgan

"Tsunami, the Aftermath — Part II" (HBO)
Written by Abi Morgan

"Why I Wore Lipstick to My Mastectomy" (Lifetime)
Written by Nancey Silvers

60-MINUTE CATEGORY (\$15,000)

"ER: There Are No Angels Here" (NBC)
Written by R. Scott Gemmill & David Zabel

"House: House vs. God" (Fox)
Written by Doris Egan

"The West Wing: Election Day, Part II" (NBC)
Written by Eli Attie & John Wells

30-MINUTE CATEGORY (\$10,000)

"The New Adventures of Old Christine: Oh God, Yes" (CBS)
Written by Jennifer Crittenden

"Scrubs: My Fallen Idol" (NBC)
Written by Bill Callahan

"The War at Home: Kenny Doesn't Live Here Anymore" (Fox)
Written by Rob Lotterstein



Humanitas Prize finalists

CHILDREN'S ANIMATION CATEGORY (\$25,000)

"Jakers! The Adventures of Piggley Winks: The Gift" (PBS)
Written by Cindy McKay, Dennis Haley & Marcy Brown

"Maya & Miguel: Give Me a Little Sign" (PBS)
Written by Evelina Fernandez

"Miss Spider's Sunny Patch Friends: The Prince, the Princess and the Bee" (Nick Jr.)
Written by Nadine van der Velde

CHILDREN'S LIVE-ACTION CATEGORY (\$25,000)

"Jump In!" (Disney Channel)
Written by Doreen Spicer and Regina Hicks & Karin Gist

"Molly: An American Girl on the Home Front" (Disney Channel)
Teleplay by Anna Sandor

SUNDANCE FEATURE FILM CATEGORY (\$10,000)

"Ezra"
Written by Newton I. Aduaka & Alain-Michel Blanc;
story by Newton I. Aduaka

"Waitress" (Fox Searchlight)
Written by Adrienne Shelly

"Where God Left His Shoes"
Written by Salvatore Stabile

THE DAVID & LYNN ANGELL FELLOWSHIP IN COMEDY WRITING (\$10,000)

"Weeds: Pot Chocolate" (Spec Script)
Jonny Mais, University of Southern California,
School of Cinematic Arts

The winners for this year's Humanitas Prize will be announced tomorrow at an invitation-only luncheon at the Hilton Universal Hotel in Universal City.

money across the board to a minimum of \$25,000 each," Young says. "It's a way to say, the work is equal, all writing is valuable, and it's not like just because you write for features you're more valuable than somebody who writes for 30-minute comedy," Desiderio says. "It's all hard work, and they're all doing good, so we think they should get the same amount of money. It's just when the prize was established, there was more of a hierarchy. Now we're trying to equalize that."

So can the awards give an incentive to writers to include deeper messages in their work? "There is a lot of nihilism in entertainment, and it's rewarded financially and it's successful — and it's easier to write," Wells says. "I think it's very worthwhile (for the) organization to honor writers for doing work not perceived as being commercially successful, (but) the commercial upside is there. It's just that it's more demanding and addresses the ethical universe where we live."

"We live in a world where people care less about what is right and more about whatever they can get away with. We will pay dearly for this slide," adds Hallmark Channel's executive vp programming David Kenin. "We need to create a hunger for those stories that show the value of caring, family and love, and then reward that storytelling. That's what Humanitas does."