

Celebrating 50 Years of Silver Gavel Awards

1958

Films/Video

ABA President Charles S. Rhyne presents the first Silver Gavel Awards “to recognize outstanding contributions to public information and understanding of the roles of law and courts in our society.” Sidney Lumet’s classic jury room drama *Twelve Angry Men* (United Artists) becomes the first film to win a Silver Gavel Award. *Judgment at Nuremberg* (Stanley Kramer Corp.) receives a Silver Gavel in 1962. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, starring Gregory Peck as Atticus Finch, wins a Silver Gavel the following year.

1960s

Books

In 1964 the ABA presents the first Silver Gavel in the Books category for *The Man Who Rode the Tiger: The Life and Times of Judge Samuel Seabury*, author Herbert Mitgang’s biography of the New York judge whose 1932 investigation led to the downfall of Tammany Hall Mayor Jimmy Walker. More than 30 years later, in 1996, author Jonathan Harr receives the Silver Gavel from ABA President Roberta Cooper Ramo for *A Civil Action*, his now classic work of novelistic nonfiction about a complex liability lawsuit and its aftermath. By 2007 publishers submit nearly 100 books for the Gavel Awards, making this the most competitive awards category.

Television News and Documentaries

Fred Friendly, who collaborated with Edward R. Murrow to create *See It Now* in the 1950s, produces 4 *CBS Reports* that earn Silver Gavels between 1961 and 1966. These news documentaries tackle such subjects as presidential succession, the rights of the accused (*Gideon’s Trumpet*) and *Birth Control and the Law*. In 1982 Friendly’s book *Minnesota Rag* (Random House), the “dramatic story of *Near v. Minnesota*, the landmark Supreme Court case on freedom of the press,” wins a Silver Gavel. In the 1980s Friendly creates the Seminars on Media and Society (now at Columbia University), which produces such Silver Gavel Award-winning television programs as *The Constitution: That Delicate Balance* (1984).

1970s

Radio

National Public Radio receives its first of nine Silver Gavels in 1974 (winning most recently in 2007) for an *All Things Considered* program examining important legal and constitutional issues raised by the Watergate scandal in the Nixon administration. Legal correspondent Nina Totenberg contributes to seven Silver Gavel Award-winning programs.

Magazines

In 1979 the Silver Gavel Award for Magazines goes to Wilbert Rideau’s “Conversations with the Dead,” published in *The Angolite*. Rideau is the inmate editor of this uncensored magazine, which is produced by prisoners at Angola, the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Warden Frank

Blackburn accepts the Silver Gavel from ABA President S. Shepherd Tate. Rideau and *The Angolite* receive a second Silver Gavel in 1980, along with national attention in the 1980s and 1990s. Described by *Life* magazine in 1993 as “the most rehabilitated prisoner in America,” Rideau is freed from prison in 2005, after serving 44 years at “The Farm.” During the 1970s, *Newsweek* magazine receives six Silver Gavels, including a 1979 cover story entitled “The Landmark Bakke Ruling” by senior editor Jerrold Footlick and correspondents Diane Camper and Lucy Howard.

1980s

Newspapers

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* wins a Silver Gavel in 1987 for reporter H. G. “Buzz” Bissinger’s series “Disorder in the Court,” which examines political interference and conflicts of interest in the Philadelphia court system. The *Inquirer* receives three other Silver Gavels in the 1980s and a record total of nine overall, receiving the first in 1968. Other newspapers receiving multiple Silver Gavel Awards during the past 50 years include *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Miami Herald*, *Dallas Morning News*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

1990s

Theater

Clarence Darrow Tonight! (ArLuck Entertainment), a one-man play of the life and courtroom battles of the famed maverick defense attorney, wins the 1996 Silver Gavel Award for Theater. The play is performed, written, and produced by noted actor/writer Laurence Luckinbill.

New Media

In 1998 the ABA introduces a category for websites and other “new media.” *Oyez.Oyez.Oyez*, a Northwestern University resource website on the U.S. Supreme Court, receives the first Silver Gavel Award for New Media. The multimedia site was created and maintained by a team of scholars, curriculum specialists and web designers led by political science professor Jerry Goldman.

2000s

Television Drama

Court TV wins Silver Gavels for TV Drama for a trio of outstanding “original movies”: *The Interrogation of Michael Crowe* (2003), *Chasing Freedom* (2005), and *The Exonerated* (2006). Back in 1960, *Perry Mason* earns the first Silver Gavel in this category—star Raymond Burr accepts the award from ABA President John Randall for lawyer-turned-writer Erle Stanley Gardner’s Paisano Productions. In 1964 “Blacklist,” an episode of the acclaimed Reginald Rose-created CBS television drama *The Defenders*, receives a Silver Gavel, the series’ second. In 1992 Law & Order Executive Producer Dick Wolf receives that series’ first of five Silver Gavels from ABA President Talbot “Sandy” D’Alemberte for the “Asylum” episode. Other episodes earning Silver Gavels are “Intolerance” (1993), “House Counsel” (1996), “DWB” (1999), and “Hate” (2000).