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Keeper Of History

The Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Series honors Pulitzer Prize-winning author Rick Atkinson at its annual dinner.

By Jackie Hill on October 22, 2015

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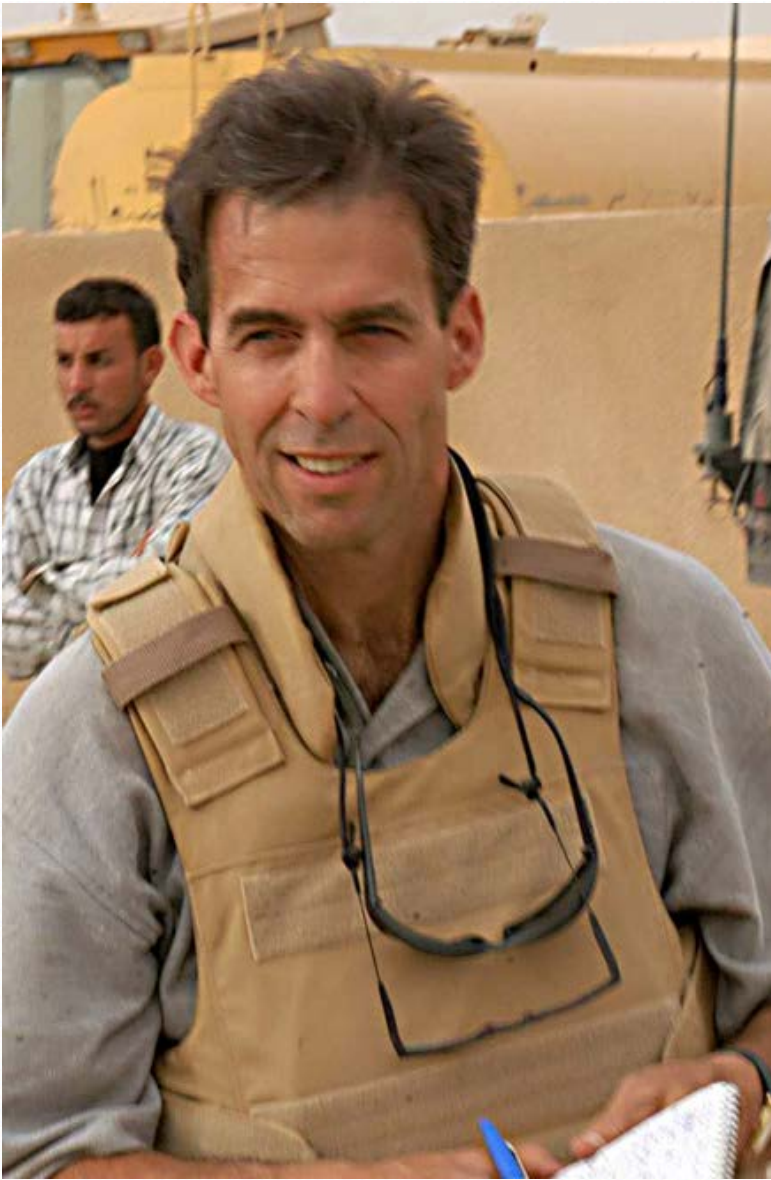
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Rick Atkinson pictured here on assignment in Iraq, will receive the Peggy v. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award on Dec. 5. Photo Courtesy of Tulsa Library Trust.

Growing up the son of a U.S. Army officer, Rick Atkinson always assumed he would follow in his father's footsteps regarding his career choice.

"I had an appointment to West Point, having given very little thought as a teenager to alternatives," says Atkinson, a three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author, former journalist and military historian. "Not long before I was to get on the bus to report for Beast Barracks – the first summer before plebe year – I thought better of it. I saved the Army a lot of trouble."

Though he did not serve in the military, Atkinson did choose a



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path immersed in it.

“When I began working at *The Washington Post* more than 30 years ago, the fact that I’d grown up in an Army family meant that I knew the difference between an F-16 fighter plane and an M-16 rifle,” says Atkinson, who served as a reporter, foreign correspondent and senior editor for the nationally renowned newspaper.

“From the first day I started at the *Post*, I was often given assignments that had some military angle. It wasn’t too big a stretch to move from that sort of journalism to writing military history,” he says.


During his prestigious journalism career, Atkinson covered war firsthand in Kuwait, Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iraq. He also wrote about other topics, ranging from politics and crime to sports and European culture. He won his first Pulitzer Prize in 1982 for national reporting and his second in 1999 when *The Washington Post* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for public service for a series of investigative articles directed and edited by Atkinson on shootings by the District of Columbia police department.

“There’s no place in the world like a newsroom for voltage, camaraderie and a sense of mission,” says Atkinson, reflecting on his days working for the press. “I worked at newspapers for more than 20 years, with some of the greatest journalists of our time, but I don’t miss it at all. The daily grind is in fact a grind, and as a writer, I prefer the longer lens and deeper voice of narrative history.”


When it comes to writing military history, Atkinson is one of the best, as his works read like great novels.

“*The American Revolution gave birth to the republic; the Civil War gave the republic its enduring contours; and World War II determined how that republic fits into the*

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“I write first *larger world.*”

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about character, and how the incredible stress of combat refracts character, allowing you to see its inner components, the way a prism refracts light to reveal the inner spectrum,” he says.

In 1999, Atkinson set out to bring a distinctive narrative voice and a literary sensibility to writing about war when he began working on his epic *Liberation Trilogy* about the U.S. military’s role in the liberation of Europe in World War II. The first volume, *An Army at Dawn: The War in North Africa, 1942-1943*, was published in 2002 and won the Pulitzer Prize for history in 2003. It was followed by *The Day of Battle: The War in Sicily and Italy, 1943-1944*, published in 2007, and concluded with the No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller *The Guns at Last Light: The War in Western Europe, 1944-1945*, released in 2013.

“The war has had a profound impact on virtually every aspect of our country, from our national evolution on issues of gender and racial equality, to our standing as an economic and military superpower,” says Atkinson about how World War II shaped the United States. “The American Revolution gave birth to the republic; the Civil War gave the republic its enduring contours; and World War II determined how that republic fits into the larger world.”

As the winner of the 2015 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, given by the Tulsa Library Trust and Tulsa City-County Library, Atkinson says it is “deeply humbling and an extraordinary honor” to be included among the list of previous winners over the past quarter century.

“Certainly, as someone who constantly moved around as a kid, the local library at whatever new place we drifted into proved a refuge, a sanctuary, a familiar hearth,” he says.

“And for a historian, a good library is the very best time machine capable of whisking us into the past. A world without libraries would be like a world without sunshine.”

PEGGY V. HELMERICH DISTINGUISHED AUTHOR SERIES

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