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Historian Rick Atkinson named 2015 Helmerich Award winner

■ Rick Atkinson will speak in Tulsa when he's honored in December.

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Rick Atkinson is pictured reporting on the war in Iraq for the Washington Post. He has been named the 2015 recipient of the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, presented by the Tulsa Library Trust. Courtesy



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HONOR

Rick Atkinson: He joins a prestigious list of honorees, including David McCullough, Toni Morrison, Neil Simon, and Ian McEwan.

by JAMES D. WATTS JR. World Scene Writer | 0 comments

Rick Atkinson has made the military his career, though not in the conventional sense of the term.

The author of a trilogy of books on World War II collectively known as "The Liberation Trilogy," Atkinson is the son of an Army officer and grew up immersed in military life and culture.

"There was a time when I thought about becoming an officer myself," Atkinson said during a recent telephone conversation. "I had been accepted to West Point and would have been a member of the class of 1974, the same class as Gen. David Petraeus.

"But in the end, I decided to take a different path," he said. "Remember, this was 1970, when Vietnam was at its height; the Kent State shootings had just happened. It all made it a tough time for a 17-year-old to commit to the military. Besides, I wanted to study literature, which you couldn't do at West Point at that time. I wanted to go to a school that had women, which wasn't the case at West Point, either."

Instead, Atkinson earned degrees in English from East Carolina University and the University of Chicago, which started him on a career path, as a journalist and historian, that has earned him two Pulitzer Prizes.

Atkinson has been named the 2015 recipient of the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished

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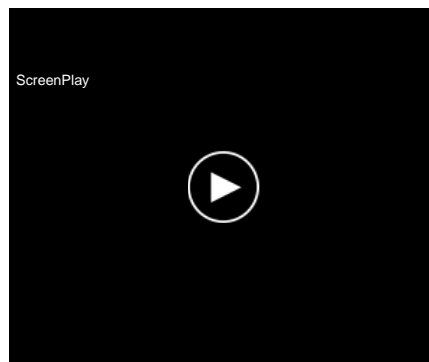
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Author Award, presented by the Tulsa Library Trust.

The award is given on behalf of the Tulsa County community to internationally acclaimed authors who have written a distinguished body of work and made a major contribution to the field of literature and letters. The award consists of a \$40,000 cash prize and an engraved crystal book.

Atkinson will receive the award at a black-tie ceremony Saturday, Dec. 5 at Southern Hills Country Club, 2636 E. 61st St. The same morning, he will give a free public presentation at Hardesty Regional Library's Connor's Cove, 8316 E. 93rd St.

Atkinson joins a prestigious list of novelists, historians and playwrights who have received the award, including Ann Patchett, David McCullough, Norman Mailer, John le Carre, Toni Morrison, Eudora Welty, Neil Simon, Ian McEwan, Michael Chabon and Shelby Foote.

"It's a humbling list to be a part of because there are so many authors on it who I admire," Atkinson said.

One of those is Foote, a novelist best known for his magisterial three-volume history of "The Civil War," a literary and historic endeavor that Atkinson's own "Liberation Trilogy" mirrors.

"Shelby Foote is certainly I writer I've long admired," he said. "I can't say that his work shaped the structure of my work, but there have many times when I've re-read passages of his history, which was always illuminating and inspirational."

Atkinson started his career as a journalist for a newspaper in Pittsburg, Kansas, then moved to Kansas City to work for the Kansas City Times. In 1981, Atkinson joined the staff of the Washington Post, and the next year he won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of stories about the West Point class of 1966, which lost more men during the Vietnam War than any other.

Those stories also led to Atkinson's first book, "The Long Gray Line: The American Journey of West Point's Class of 1966."

"Yes, the irony isn't lost on me — that all the books I've written have been about the military," Atkinson said. "But at the time I got into the business, there were very few people my age or younger that had any sort of experience with the military. The older generation, such as my boss at the Post, Ben Bradlee, had all served in some way, because of the draft.

"So the fact that I knew the difference between an F-16 and an M16 meant that I tended to get a lot of military assignments," he said.

Atkinson retired from journalism in 1999 to devote himself to writing books.

"To be honest, I don't miss the daily grind of journalism," he said. "Of course I miss my friends, but I learned that my voice as a writer is much better suited to narrative history."

Atkinson spent 15 years researching and writing "The Liberation Trilogy."

"My interest in World War II is congenital, I think," he said. "I was born in Germany when my father was stationed there and grew up in Austria for a while, and World War II was definitely a part of the landscape.

"But also, there really is no greater story than World War II," Atkinson said. "During the time I was working in Berlin, that rekindled my interest in the history and the mystery of the war. No novelist could create the characters that were involved in the war. And I also recognized that the greatest events in human history — and World War II is certainly that — are bottomless. Historians have only just scratched the surface of the archives that are out there."

Atkinson is at work on a new trilogy, this time focusing on the American Revolution.

"Again, this is a topic that has fascinated me since I was kid," he said. "The characters are

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just as compelling as those I encountered in studying World War II.

"But more importantly, the American Revolution is our creation myth, if you will," Atkinson said. "It's about where we came from, and what we've become. You can see the delineations of 21st-century America when you look at these idealistic, rebellious colonials."

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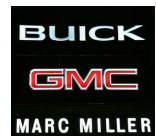
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