

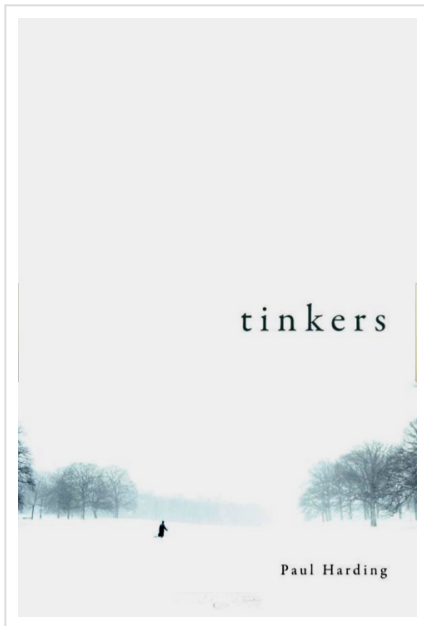
A Weird End Run for the Pulitzer

Posted on **September 27, 2010** by **Marla Akin**



It's the story of the Little Novel That Could. **Paul Harding** was an Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate with a slim manuscript about a dying new England clock repairman and a drawer full of rejections. After three years of shopping around his novel *Tinkers*, he finally sold it to the tiny nonprofit **Bellevue Literary Press** for an advance the size of a big publisher's paperclip budget. They printed 3500 copies. Still, the struggling author was glad to have his work in print. Harding and his family were getting by on his wife's teacher salary and his unemployment, and he was still driving the eighteen-year-old clunker station wagon which had served him since his days as drummer for the rock band Cold Water Flat in the 90s.

Bellevue is a curious hybrid, a literary press housed in the infamous eponymous hospital, a part of New York University's School of Medicine. Created by doctors, the press seeks to illuminate "the human experience in medicine," and they bring out one fiction title a year alongside titles exploring the intersections of science and the arts.



But Bellevue editorial director Erika Goldman utterly believed in Harding's book. "I found myself," she says, "weeping for the beauty of the prose." Goldman passed a galley to a ***Publishers Weekly*** reviewer, who likewise couldn't put it down and gave it a coveted starred review. Sales reps and staff of independent bookstores on both coasts who read the novel got behind it and began word of mouth campaigns. There were no press kits, no media blitzes, no book tours. Reading groups formed around dinner tables in friends' houses, where Harding was invited to read. Rave reviews came in from the ***New Yorker***, the ***Los Angeles Times***, the ***Boston Globe*** and an **NPR story** got the attention of Random House, who offered Harding a deal on his next two books. Bellevue printed more copies.

So, naturally, as *Tinkers* went on to win its ultimate recognition, the story had more strangely homespun twists. The Pulitzer Prize committee waived the \$50 submission fee from Bellevue in consideration of their nonprofit status. Astounded enough at his book's inclusion by the prize jury, Harding says things became entirely surreal when, as announcement time drew near, he got online to check the Pulitzer website and found his own name there as winner. No thrilling phone call. No crisp letter or telegram as in olden days. Not even an e-mail. He calls the whole experience "this weird end run from noble obscurity to a Pulitzer."

Tinkers is the first such end run since John Kennedy Toole's *A Confederacy of Dunces*, published by LSU Press, won the fiction Pulitzer in 1981. In a time when book sales are dominated by powerhouse sellers and shaped by the bottom line, a win for a fledgling author and a nonprofit press is heartening news. Critics praise the book's quiet lyricism, the powerful evocation of family history and memory, and Harding's stunning sentences. "There are few perfect debut American novels," says NPR's John Freeman. "Walter Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* come to mind. To this list ought to be added Paul Harding's devastating first book, *Tinkers*. . . . Harding has written a masterpiece."

There are a quarter of a million copies of *Tinkers* in print now, and Austinites will get the chance to hear Harding as part of the **Michener Center for Writers'** annual reading series on **Thursday**,

September 30 at 7:30 pm on campus in the **Avaya Auditorium. ACE 2.302**. Parking is available in the nearby UT garage at 24th and San Jacinto.

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About Marla Akin

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1 THOUGHT ON "A WEIRD END RUN FOR THE PULITZER"



Avaya

on **October 5, 2010 at 8:08 pm** said:

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