

A fair shake



**Philip
Dine**

We've criticized media coverage of postal issues when warranted. Fairness requires noting that as the Postal Service struggles with the pandemic's economic and safety impacts, the reporting has sharply improved.

Many of the glib clichés are gone, the valor of letter carriers is emphasized, the rationale for federal assistance to USPS made clear, the public's appreciation for postal employees chronicled.

Why? My quick take: It involves the journalistic practice of "parachuting in" to cover an important story, usually a derogatory term signifying the arrival on scene of a reporter unfamiliar with the terrain. But this time, the process has been beneficial. We are dealing with a myriad of fresh reporters un-

cumbered by conventional wisdom, aware that they have much to learn—and the results are reflected in their stories.

Meanwhile, there's this: Accompanying the news stories has been a stream of extraordinary essays—some historical or philosophical, others based around personal reflections—about the value of the post office and the meaning of mail, typically penned by historians or authors or activists.

The daily reporting informs; these pieces inspire.

Casey Cep, who graduated from Harvard a decade-plus ago, burst upon the American literary scene with her first book, *Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee*. A year later, this May, she wrote a *New Yorker* article, "We Can't Afford to Lose the Postal Service."

The opening line reads like a novel: "I am probably one of the least consequential things my mother has ever delivered." The article then lingers on the close bonds her mother, a rural letter carrier for 38 years on Maryland's Eastern Shore, forged on the route.

It closes like this, "At a time when too few things connect us as a country, and too few of us have faith in our public institutions, we can't afford to lose the one we trust the most."

Growing up, Cep told me, her mother's and father's union contracts meant "braces" and a "union scholarship" for college: "I knew from a very young age that unions were the only power my parents had."

What prompted her piece? "It feels at this moment that the Postal Service is very precious. It is a unique moment. I think I have already hounded everyone I know to lobby Congress, and to thank their carrier."

She was "honored to speak" to us, given NALC's "advocacy on behalf of city carriers and the public who rely on the Postal Service," she said.

As for the widespread praise for her book, Cep said, "I'm proud to have written it," before quickly adding: "The great pride for me was knowing how many copies my mother got to deliver to customers who had known our family for decades."

Christopher W. Shaw, a California-based academic with a Ph.D. in history, wrote "The Conservative Case for the U.S. Postal Service" for *The American Conservative* magazine.

It wades into current Republican politics and argues convincingly—citing national security, rural culture, the Constitution, small businesses, community life and historical continuity—why conservative support for USPS should remain rock-solid, whatever the politics of the day.

In his compelling 2019 book, *Money, Power, and the People: The American Struggle to Make Banking Democratic*, Shaw delves into the history and import of postal savings. His first book: *Preserving the People's Post Office*.

Like Cep, he told me that growing up, union magazines—for IBEW, mine workers, operating engineers—were a household learning resource. Talking to letter carriers, he's impressed by how informed they are. He credits NALC: "Your journal is one of the good ones."

Will Leitch's headline atop yet another essay published in May includes this splendid phrase, "But the American post office is still magic—and I can prove it." How? By depicting in the NBC essay "the added poignancy" of his mail correspondence with newsletter readers during the shutdown.

It's not as if Leitch lacks things to do. He's a national correspondent for Major League Baseball, a contributing editor to *New York* magazine, founder of the sports blog Deadspin and author of five books, including *Are We Winning?*—on fathers, sons and baseball.

So why did he too agree to a *Postal Record* interview?

Growing up in Illinois farm country, he says, the mail was a link to the outside world; he marvels even today at "one of the few connective tissues remaining in this disparate and divided country."

"I like your audience and I like your publication," Leitch said. "To me, it's more important than ever."

EDITORIAL STAFF:
Director of Communications and Media Relations Philip Dine
Designer/Web Editor Mike Shea
Writer/Editor Rick Hodges
Writer/Editor Jenessa Wagner
Editorial Assistant Clare Foley

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