

2020 PEN/Malamud Award Ceremony

December 4, 2020

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Deborah Tannen: Good evening. Thank you. Thank you all for joining us as we confer the 32nd annual PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. My name is Deborah Tannen. I am a member of the PEN/Faulkner Board and Co-Chair of the PEN/Malamud Committee.

Stephanie, I think you're going to introduce yourself. You're muted.

Stephanie Grant: There we go. Better?

Deborah: Yes.

Stephanie: Hi, my name is Stephanie Grant, and I direct the MFA Program in Creative Writing here at American University.

Deborah: Lisa.

Lisa Page: Hi, I'm Lisa Page, and I am Co-Chair of the Malamud Award Committee, and also a member of the Board of Directors of PEN/Faulkner. Thank you all for being here.

Deborah: On behalf of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, we're thrilled to welcome you to tonight's celebration of this year's PEN/Malamud Award winner, Lydia Davis, and her amazing work.

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a nonprofit literary organization, it's based in Washington DC. Our mission is celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers. The foundation administers two national literary awards, the one that brings us together tonight, of course, and also the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

We also have a Writers in Schools program that we're very proud of. It brings free books and the authors who wrote them to DC public schools and public charter schools. Our Literary Conversations series brings contemporary authors together for readings and discussions.

Just a word about the PEN/Malamud Award. The PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story was established by the family of the master short story writer, Bernard Malamud. Their generous gift formed the basis of the award fund. We're honored that members of the family are with us tonight, including Bernard Malamud's daughter, Janna Malamud Smith, who will be presenting the award.

Tonight's ceremony is different in two ways. One, you're very aware [that] it's virtual, which means more of you can attend from distant places, including a number of past winners who are members of the Advisory Board to the Malamud Committee. We're very grateful for that.

Second, we're thrilled to be partnering with American University's MFA program. I'll pass the virtual lectern to Stephanie, who will tell you a bit more about that.

Stephanie: Thank you, Deborah. On behalf of the College of Arts and Sciences and the Department of Literature, and of course, the MFA Program in Creative Writing here at AU, I too am thrilled to welcome you. When my colleague, the novelist Dolen Perkins-Valdez, who also happens to be the Chair of the Board of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation – when she approached me about co-hosting the PEN/Malamud ceremony, I needed very little convincing. I agreed with Dolen immediately that our MFA program, founded more than 30 years ago by the poet Myles Killebrew, and shepherded for decades by a former PEN/Faulkner Chair, the writer Richard McCann, was the perfect host for many reasons.

Let me just speak briefly about one of those reasons. The short story form itself is at the center of much of our prose teaching. A form that perhaps gets less attention in the publishing world, but which is prized among poets and writers. In literary circles, the short story is applauded for its insistence on compression, and the ways that compression transforms language and creates what we might call presence, the writer's presence, and the reader's engagement with that presence.

Short stories, and the particular stories of the writer, whom we've come to celebrate tonight, are about many things, but they are also always about being, about what it means to be alive in this beautiful and terrifying world. All of us here at AU, students, and faculty, alums, and administrators are giddy with excitement at the opportunity to hear Lydia Davis read tonight. Many of us have been studying her work all semester.

We are honored to participate in the Malamud ceremony, and we are hopeful this will be the first of many collaborations with the Foundation, which is at the heart of DC's dazzling and polyphonic literary world. Thank you.

Deborah: Thank you, Stephanie. I also would like to thank the PEN/Malamud Award Committee for their hard work, as well as the Malamud Advisory Board for being part of that process. Just a quick word about tonight, on the order of events – we will have a reading first, followed by a brief conversation and question and answer, and then the award will be conferred. It's my honor to introduce Lydia Davis.

Language could be fluid. Like water, it floats us along, in the stew of story, and what is that stew made of? Flavors, sensations, images, metaphors. Bernard Malamud once said, "I love metaphor. It provides two loaves where there seems to be one. Sometimes it throws in a load of fish, thus the stew of the story." Writer Lydia Davis loves metaphor too. In her hands, before you know it, a fish tank becomes a universe. A cane is more than a walking stick. Grammar questions are interrogations on death, but metaphor is only the beginning. Davis also celebrates the total aspects of language and she plays them like notes on a keyboard, full of range and rhythm.

A mown lawn becomes a long moan. Syntax addiction [is] transformed. There are percussive elements. She makes them sing. Davis simultaneously lays out the contradictions of intimacy. There are patterns and correlations, sadness and beauty. There is precision in the language. There is calculation and there is play. She has invented a genre entirely onto itself, said writer Dave Eggers, a form combining the precision and the economy of poetry, the right storytelling of the short fiction and a clear-eyed and surgical inquiry into the nature of existence itself.

Lydia Davis is a short story writer, novelist and translator. She has published six short story collections – most recently, *Can't and Won't* – and one novel, *The End of the Story*, along with many other publications. She has also published numerous, widely acclaimed translations in French literature and philosophy in English, including works by Marcel Proust, Maurice Blanchot and Gustave Flaubert. She's the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, a MacArthur Fellowship, the Man Booker International Prize, and now, the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. Please welcome Lydia Davis.

Lydia Davis: Nice to be here. That always feels strange because here I am at home, but I'm also in public and I'm not quite used to that. Go from cooking dinner to walking on stage, which is still my own study. It's very odd, also, not to be able to see all of you who've come here, I'm just to assume you really are out there.

I'm very honored by this award, particularly since, of course, like a lot of writers, I read and studied Bernard Malamud's stories and novels when I was young and on after that and also met the family. We've been talking about that, met Janna and her brother Paul Malamud when I was young and they were young. It's very moving to me, for that reason, to be awarded this.

I'm going to read about 10 of them. I'm going to watch the clock a little bit because even though my stories that I'm going to read are very short, the time can stretch out unexpectedly. So I am planning to read about 10 stories, but some of them are only 10 seconds long.

The first one is called, *Community Notice: Redundancy Example #4* and I do have a habit of titling things, number four or number six, when there actually aren't any other preceding numbers yet. I always figure there will be sooner or later.

So this is *Community Notice: Redundancy Example #4*.

This is a reminder that today the community will be gathering this afternoon to come together as a community.

This one, a little bit longer, is called *End of Phone Conversation with Verizon Adjustment Person*.

I say: "I guess I'd better take your name..."

She says: "It's Shelley... as in Byron, Keats, and Shelley."

"Hah!...I'm glad you like them too!" I say.

“Oh, yes,” says Shelley.

“I wish my name were Keats,” I add, “but it’s not...”

“I do too!” she says. “Thank you for choosing Verizon wireless.”

This one is called *Egg*.

The word for egg in Dutch is ei. In German, it is ei. In Yiddish, “. In old English, I. The word for egg in Norwegian is egg. In Icelandic, it is egg. In Faroese, egg. In Swedish, ägg. In Danish, egg. In Old Norse, the word is egg. In Middle English, egg. In modern English, egg. In French, it is oeuf. In Scots Gaelic, it is ugh.

Two American babies long ago are learning to speak. They’re learning English. They have no choice. They’re close to 18 months old. One is a week older than the other. Sometimes they fight over a toy, at other times, they play quietly by themselves in the same room.

On the living room floor, today, one baby sees a round white thing on the rug. He gets to his feet with some difficulty and toddles over to it. He says, “eck.” At this, the other one looks up interested, gets to his feet. Also with some difficulty toddles over to see and says, “ack.” They’re learning the word. They’ve almost got it. It does not matter that the round white object is not an egg, but a ping pong ball. In time, they will learn that too, maybe even on this same afternoon.

Claim to Fame #1: My Relationship to Ezra Pound.

I don’t know the best way to express this. I’ll try [it] a few ways:

Pound’s son Omar was the husband of my half-sister’s father’s niece.

My half-sister’s father’s sister had a daughter who married Pound’s son Omar.

My half-sister’s father’s niece, [that is] my half-sister’s first cousin on her father’s side, was married to Ezra Pound’s Omar.

One of the two daughters of my half-sister’s father’s sister Louise Margaret married Pound’s son Omar.

My half-sister’s aunt Louise Margaret’s daughter’s father-in-law was Ezra Pound.

My half-sister’s aunt’s daughter’s father-in-law was Ezra Pound.

My half-sister’s first cousin’s father-in-law was Ezra Pound.

Later:

I explained this as best I [could] to a friend who is an expert on Pound, since I [thought] it might interest him. He [was] mildly interested, but then [pointed] out that Omar was not in fact Pound's biological son.

His only biological child was one he did not acknowledge.

That child was the illegitimate daughter of Olga Rudge.

I don't mind having my facts corrected.

This is a travel story called *Caramel Drizzle*.

"Caramel syrup or caramel drizzle?"

"Sorry?"

"Caramel syrup or caramel drizzle?"

This is [an] overheard conversation. I look up: [it is] a tall, slim woman with a ponytail, buying the drinks at a Starbucks counter. She is wearing a dark blue uniform. We are in an airport. She is probably a flight attendant.

Long pause for deliberation. She has not encountered this choice before.

"I'll take the drizzle."

Now I see her from behind, over there, with her blonde ponytail and sticking-out ears, drinking her caramel drizzle.

While she stood at the counter and deliberated, I was deciding that the drizzle was a smaller amount of caramel than the syrup, even though surely syrup must be involved in the drizzle.

Later, she walks away with another airline employee, the empty cup in her hand, the caramel drizzle inside her.

[And] then she turns out to be the attendant on my flight—her name is Shannon. So her caramel drizzle will also be going with us to Chicago.

This is called, *Just A Little*.

Agnes Varda, the French film director, said in an interview that she liked to do a little sewing, a little cooking, a little gardening, a little baby care, but just a little.

Interesting Personal Vegetables.

In Indonesia, years ago, domestic servants collected and saved pieces of paper discarded by the household. They would make little bundles of them and sell them to market vendors for wrapping their produce. Among the odd pieces of paper would sometimes be a blue aerogram letter. And so, now and then, your bawang putih or buncis would come home wrapped in someone else's personal mail.

Some of His Drinking Habits.

He likes to drink at airport bars, he likes to drink on trains, and he likes to drink at the bar at South Station and at any hotel bar.

He likes these bars and the train, because no one knows him, and everyone is on a trip or about to go off on a trip.

He says [that] people form bonds at these places—but it's not personal.

My Father Has Something to Tell Me.

My father stands in the kitchen and tries to explain to me something about Christianity, but I've had another long day. I'm tired. I'm not listening and he can see that I'm not listening. Later, he goes upstairs and types out a two-paragraph statement, clarifying what he was trying to explain to me earlier. Before he brings it to me, he shows it to my mother for her comments. I figured this out later because I remember hearing his footsteps over my head, going into her room, the silence while she reads what he has written, and then the rumble of their voices.

He comes down to where I am now, in the living room, and hands me the typed statement. He says that, of course, I don't have to read it right away.

I do a couple of train stories. I used to take the train a lot down to New York City and I loved it. And so, since I had that period of quiet, I often would start writing and often write something that rose directly from the train.

That Obnoxious Man

That obnoxious man, I saw him on the train the other day, and I knew who he was, but I couldn't remember his name. I kept thinking about him after that, trying to remember his name. He was so obnoxious long ago when I knew him. By now, his hair is white, but he still has that way of staring straight at you like a frightened rabbit with his eyes bugging out. I am on the train again today and I wish he would get on, then I would ask him what his name was. Maybe after that, I could stop thinking about him.

The beginning of this, that obnoxious man made me think of a point by Lorine Niedecker, or else it was the other way around then it is because of the Lorine Niedecker that I say "that obnoxious man."

Her poem goes, "The museum man. I wish he'd take pause, spit box. I'm going to take that spit box out and bury it in the ground and put a stone on top because without that stone on top, it would come back." Actually, it probably worked both ways. I began the story with those words, because somewhere in my memory, though I didn't know it was the Niedecker poem. Then when I looked at my story, it reminded me of the poem.

Now, I might write it a different way more like her poem. That obnoxious man, I saw him on the train and I knew exactly who he was from long ago, but I couldn't remember his name. Oh, I wish he'd get on the train again, so I could ask him his name. Then I could bury him and put a stone on top.

Sneezes on the Train.

The young Asian man across the aisle from me and one seat forward sneezes. The man in the seat behind him, bald and wearing a pink striped shirt says, "Bless you!" not loudly but very distinctly. The Asian man starts, looks apprehensive, but does not turn around. Then the man in the seat behind me sneezes twice in a row, quickly. I wait for the man across the aisle to bless him, too, but he says nothing. The Asian man sneezes again, but this time very quietly, carefully smothering [his] sneeze in both [a] Kleenex and a scarf, then slowly turns his head just enough to glance discreetly over his shoulder at the man behind him, who continues to remain silent. Much later in the trip, the Asian man is long gone from the train, and the man behind me has been replaced by a woman. Now this woman sneezes four tiny, high-pitched, suppressed sneezes in a row, followed by a fifth. I wait, and listen. Again, the man across the aisle in the pink striped shirt says nothing. Either he has lost interest, as he sits bent over studying his screen, or he feels that one bless-you per ride is enough.

The last, quite short again, is called, *Improving My German.*

All my life I have been trying to improve my German.

At last my German is better

—but now I am old and ill.

Soon I will die,

with better German.

Thank you.

Susan Coll: Thank you so much, Lydia. That was wonderful. We can both pause to listen to the rapturous applause that I'm sure is happening right now. I had a huge smile on my face. I absolutely loved hearing you read. My favorite subcategory of your work are the train stories. I was so glad you read those. I have so many questions.

Before I begin, I want to remind the audience that we're going to have a Q&A after this. If you could put your questions in the Q&A box at the bottom, I will take some of them at the end.

I've been reading and admiring your work for many years. It's really an honor to be in conversation with you tonight. I thought we ought to begin with a question about short story form, since we're here to celebrate the short story tonight. You are known for transcending, reinventing, redefining form. Some of your stories read like poems. I wonder what your thoughts are about form and why these are stories and not poems, some of them, anyway?

Lydia: It's really tough. I would say that some are poems, legitimately, a few. I think I call them stories because I started out wanting to write short stories and did write short stories of a more traditional kind. It didn't occur to me, way back then, that there were a lot of different ways to write a short story. I started out writing the most traditional short stories, I believe. It was really over the years that they evolved into something different and really over the years that I finally or gradually or both, discovered or abruptly, I think -- It happens in all sorts of ways, abruptly, one day you realize there were other ways to write. I saw that there were an infinity of ways of writing a story that could also gradually come to resemble a poem. Sometimes I'm writing prose, but I'm stopping each prose line at the – Start writing short prose line, then going down writing the next short prose line, so that it looks like a poem, but to me, it's still prose. It gets very complicated, but I think my definition of a poem is that the language is very much foregrounded.

There's so much to say about this, but I love the freedom of being able to write in any way at all. I still write the traditional short story sometimes, and then all the way down to something that's only a line long. It's fun.

Susan: A related question to the poetry question is, there's a real musical quality to your writing, even in your sentence structure. You will sometimes have these amazing kind of long, twisting, looping sentences and then you'll punctuate it with a very short staccato sentence. Then I learned that you actually have a musical background, that you've said that was your first love. I wonder if the music informs your writing?

Lydia: I'm sure it does. I do hear everything in my head as I write it. I do hear anything I read in my head. I think music training, I used to wonder what it was all good for because like a lot of others, I got lots and lots of training. If I picked up the violin, which I labored over for years, if I picked it up and played for you, it would be painful. The piano is a little better, partly because you can't play out of tune, but you can certainly make mistakes all over, and so on. You have all this close training and what does it amount to? Then I began realizing that it feeds into writing in many, many ways. I thought it was just a few ways, but the more I thought about it, the more ways I saw.

Part of it is your training. I studied music theory, too, but when you're playing the violin, your teacher is very demanding, really unlike a writing teacher, I must say. Your violin teacher is very insistent. I think all of mine were male. He says, "No. That's not quite in tune. No, it's not in tune yet." I said, "Legato," and it's not legato. What that does, of course, is train your ear. You're

listening, listening, listening, "Why is it still not in tune? Why is it still not in tune?" I think that carries over to listening very closely to language. That's just one of the ways.

Perfectionism is the other way, in that example. The music teacher doesn't let you get away with not doing it right. That carries over to your own writing or my own writing. It's not quite right yet.

Susan: You are clearly listening so closely to language that you find a story in a conversation with a Verizon representative. Do you find some of your stories are snippets from a neighborhood listserv, or from road signs, so you are always observing? I wonder, does that ever feel like it gets in the way of life or does that just make life full of possibility?

Lydia: It doesn't get in the way. It's more like what you've just said, it just enriches it, because I'm not always looking for material. It's not as if I'm looking, I just go along, and the material jumps out at me.

The first one I read about the community notice was just something I read, and it couldn't help but jump out at me, and the same with the Verizon conversation and the same, really, with the *Caramel Drizzle*. When you're waiting for something, like waiting for your flight to be called, which won't happen to me again because I'm not going to be flying anymore, I decided. You're waiting, and so you just watch people. That story might never have happened if I hadn't watched her sequentially. I saw her at different times and then she was on my flight, so it wrote itself, in a way. I enjoy all that very much.

Susan: As Lisa mentioned in the introduction, you are a translator. You're fluent in, I'm not sure how many languages, but a number of languages, and you've translated *Madame Bovary* and *Swann's Way*. I wonder how your translation work factors into your own writing? Are they in separate boxes, or are they related?

Lydia: That's complicated, too, of course. I'm really only somewhat fluent, and making mistakes in French. I'm fluent in rudimentary German. I can read languages, but that doesn't mean I can speak them. There's such a difference. It obviously makes me pay a lot of attention to English, for one thing, because you're writing the work, whatever it is, that proves to also bear in English, so it makes you aware of all the different ways of saying something in English, and all the different possible words for this one word. It practices you and enriches you in a terrific way.

I like it because I leave myself, I leave my language, I leave everything to enter into whatever it is I'm translating. That's a great relief to leave and then come back again. It's also a great relief to write something in English that I don't have to make up. I don't have to think of it. I don't have to structure it. My only job is to write a good sentence or write a bad sentence if the original is bad. It's a form of writing but without the pressure and the anxiety of writing your own work, and then I think I've often thought that the frustration, in a way, that's involved with having to write what it is you're translating builds up in a healthy way so that when you can write your own work, you're suddenly liberated. I think it works that way too.

Susan: Your work works on so many different levels and, on the surface, it's very accessible and there's this lovely ease in hearing you read and reading your work, but there's also such

complexity and I wonder how you take as – What do you do with your sentences? You seem to labor them and polish and polish, you referred to bad sentences, but I don't think you have a bad sentence anywhere in any of your work.

Lydia: Well, I labor and labor over it. Actually, the way I work is, I'll write something quite quickly, but at least most of it very quickly, and then I spend a lot of time making sure that it's reading the way I want it to read. Now, what was your question?

[laughter]

Susan: I guess just thinking about your revision process and your polishing, which you answered.

Lydia: I thought you said something earlier that I–

Susan: I was talking about the complexity, which is part of the brilliance of your work that is operating–

Lydia: The apparent simplicity and the complexity underneath, and that interests me because I think it's a big mistake, of course, to try to be complex or even to try to convey some big philosophical – For me, it would be a problem and a mistake, not for everyone. I like to think that the development of a complexity takes place elsewhere. It takes place within you over time when you're thinking and reading, and then you can write quite simply and, with any luck, the complexity will come out in the work, even if the surface seems very simple.

Susan: I see we have a lot of questions in the chat box here. Before I turn to those, I did have one more thing that I wanted to ask you about. Form, which is in addition to blending poetry and story form, some of your stories feel very personal. I wonder, I know many fiction writers bristle at the thought that they're ever writing autobiography. I wonder how you feel about that or some of these do feel – we feel like we really know you and do you want us to feel that way?

Lydia: I feel ambivalent about it. I'm not having a bristling. I don't mind it being taken as autobiographical, except that there's always a little slant on it. There's always a little fiction in that the woman or even just the narrator, because sometimes a narrator is male, is a man, it's not quite me. It's some aspect of me or really more like a made up figure who has some of – I could take a quality in myself, maybe even one that I don't like, and put it in the forefront of a character, so she's obnoxiously whatever it is that I don't like in myself, or she's just different, so I can start from myself and take her somewhere else.

I wrote a little story about the two mayors in my village, the present mayor and the former mayor disagreeing about a word, so I took it from life, but because of the way it's selected and structured, it becomes something else. It's not still part of this community. That's another thing I like that fiction can do.

Susan: Great. Let me go to our Q&A here from the audience. We have a question from Maryanne who asks, do you write long and then revise, or does it come out of you so wonderfully concise?

Lydia: Oh, I see, revise from long back down to short. No, it's usually, with a few exceptions, it's born at the length and the span that it's going to be. It's either born very small or it's born very long. I have a story in the last book that's 40 pages, so they can be very long with exceptions. One exception was *Kafka Cooks Dinner*, which I thought was going to be about a page and a half, and it was about Kafka having trouble deciding what to make for dinner because I have trouble often.

I thought Kafka would have even more trouble because he was such a one for hesitating and double thinking everything, but it just grew and grew and grew. That became a long story.

Susan: Stephanie asks, can you talk more about that realization that there are other ways to write?

Lydia: Yes. I did keep writing in the traditional short story form, and I think that was very good for me because I was disciplining myself. I was learning how to do it. Now you have dialogue. Now you have description, and then I read the work of Russell Edson. I'm sure that I could have had this epiphany reading other writers. I should have had it even reading Kafka's parables and paradoxes, but it happened to be Russell Edson.

I think the reason was that his stories don't always work. He has this very short and very absurd and sometimes weirdly violent stories that made me realize, "Oh, I could just let loose and do whatever fantastic thing I wanted to do," but then to answer her question more, it didn't just stop there. I didn't just say, "Oh, I can write short and absurd fable-like stories," then I would find another form. "Oh, I could write in that form," and then another form. "I could write in that form." It was an eagerness to try different things and then I would go as far as I could with them sometimes and move on to try something else. If Stephanie is interested in doing that, I'd encourage her.

Susan: Catherine asks, how do you decide when a piece of writing is ready to be shared?

Lydia: That's an interesting one too. Some are never, never shared. That's the beauty of – you always start writing in a private place so you can try something that you just never would show anyone anyway, but you still try to make it good in some way for yourself or for itself. With other things, I do a lot of leaving things alone, so I'll get it to a certain point and then leave it alone for quite a long time or I'll get stuck. It'll be 90% there, but the ending's very weak and not good. I know it's not good, but I know that piece is worth saving.

Again, I'll leave it alone and come back and try different things. When it has a certain tightness and roundness, I think it's finished. Some are finished and aren't as strong as others, aren't as interesting as others, but that's just the way it is and they're still finished. That's the best I can do with that one.

Susan: Emily asks, how often do you write?

Lydia: That's a tough one too. When I was writing the one and only novel, I did write on a real schedule. I had to get through something much longer than I was used to. I would try to start around 10:30 or whatever, and go till 4:00, but then with the stories, they happened a lot more sporadically, and if I'm working on a translation or something, I might not do any of my own writing for quite a while, or something will occur to me like the Verizon conversation, just something happens, and it's irresistible, so I quickly scribble down something, most of it, and come back, revisit it, work on it a little bit more, get it a little better.

That's the way they happen. The thing is to grab the chance right away, do it right away, I think, before it gets away from you, and do as much as you can right away until you've safely captured it, and then at your leisure later, you can come back to it.

Susan: Here's a question from one of the classes at AU from Patricia. She says, in class, we discussed your story, *Jury Duty*. My students had questions about how you came to decide on the Q&A form. Can you also talk about your protagonist's characterization? Which leads me to a second part question. Do you remember the details of everything you've written? You have written so many stories.

Lydia: Oh, I certainly forget the details of some stories. I think my first longer book was published in 1986, so that's 34 years ago, if I got the math right. Unless I've reread a story recently, I don't necessarily remember details. I can remember, more or less, what it is. *Jury Duty* I've revisited a few times. Well, I had jury duty and I didn't ever serve on a trial, which is too bad, it would've been interesting. I just attended, maybe even just one day, I can't remember, to see if they needed to select me.

I'm distracted because one of my cats is clawing at the door. He may start meowing.

I wanted to write about it. I found it a very, very interesting experience, just that one day. I wanted to write about it, I knew that, but I didn't worry about doing it yet or I didn't know how. I know I was reading David Foster Wallace's *Interviews with Hideous Men* that gave me the idea of that form of a question that doesn't appear, only the answer appears.

I used that form, but it didn't even occur to me till – It must've been a subconscious impulse, it didn't occur to me that that mirrored, of course, the question and answer of – Even selecting a jury is all question and answer, but for some reason, that didn't occur to me. That's the form I used. The question was blank and then we see only the answer, which is a lot of fun because then you can have the answer be something like, "Yes," and we don't know what the question was, or we have to try and figure it out. That was good.

Susan: Well, we are close to the time where we need to turn this over to Janna, but I see a question that I meant to ask myself. I will read this question from Susan – who are some of the writers you return to, especially in short fiction and prose poetry? I wanted to add my question to that, which is, I've seen you suggest that many of us, myself included, are guilty of not reading enough classics on a regular basis. I wanted to incorporate that into her question.

Lydia: I don't tend to return to writers. It's interesting because I feel as if I should. There is Beckett that I haven't read, and there is Kafka that I haven't read. I think I've read most of Kafka, but I tend to devour a lot of a writer, and once I've done that, I don't usually return. I'm trying to think if there's anyone I've returned to. I do have a list of writers and works that I feel I should read. When you say guilty about not reading enough classics, one that haunts me is *Don Quixote*.

I'm in a very ambitious book club, which only started because of this pandemic and Zoom, because some of us are on the West Coast and some of us are on the East Coast and we couldn't have this nice Zoom book club if it weren't for that, weren't for Zoom. I made them read, and I put it that way because we all got to choose a book and everyone had to at least try to read it. I made them read *Beowulf* just because I had never read *Beowulf* and I felt bad about that, even though it's not very long, it's only about 100 pages.

We read *Beowulf*, and my next suggestion is going to be to read part of *Don Quixote*. That way, I will finally read *Don Quixote*. Also, because of the pandemic, I have gotten greedy for very readable, well-written books and read two of Willa Cather's books. I long ago read *My Antonia* and *Death Comes to the – What is it, the Bishop of the Archbishop?* [*Death Comes for the Archbishop*]

Anyway. [chuckles] I had read those a long time ago, but I read two more of hers. Now, I have a hunger for reading work that's very well-written, that I can count on to be very well-written, but that also is engrossing. That for bedtime, and then more difficult things like *Beowulf* for wide awake time.

Susan: Well, I just saw something pop up that said we have time for one more question, but I don't know how long ago that popped up, so I'll ask—

Lydia: An hour ago.

Susan: —a very quick question that I just saw. I can't remember who asked it, but somebody would like to know the name of your cat.

Lydia: Well, that's nice. If you see a little black shape in front of the red cushion on the settle there behind me, that's Lucy. She just moved.

Susan: Oh, there she is, yes.

Lydia: She's saying hello. That's Lucy, but she has to stay segregated from two other cats, one of them scratching at the door, two big boys, Pete and Jack. They don't get along, so Lucy spends all day in my study, and then she's let out at night and the boys are locked up in another room.

[laughter]

Lydia: It's very complicated with pets.

Susan: Maybe the one and only upside of doing this on Zoom is that we get a glimpse into your study and we get to meet your cats.

Lydia: You get to meet my cat.

Susan: [chuckles] On that note, I would like to thank you very much. I loved talking with you. I'm going to turn this over to Janna Malamud Smith to present the award.

Lydia: Thank you very much. Bye.

Susan: Bye.

Lydia: Hi, Janna.

Janna Malamud Smith: Hi. Thank you both. Thank you to the PEN/Faulkner Committee Board, and especially to the PEN/Malamud Committee, and to Deborah and Lisa for their great stewardship as we've seen just now. Thank you all for attending. I get to do two things on these evenings. One is to hand the award to the winner, which we're going to do in your imagination this evening, and the other is to evoke a little bit about my father. Every year, I try to capture a little bit. Here we go.

My father didn't learn English until he entered grade school. Yiddish was the language spoken by his mother and father, his first language, and one that often later dropped words into his stories and less often, into our family life. Sometimes we heard a brief schlemiel or schmegegge, but never a sentence longer than [unintelligible] what was mine, what was me? Since my mother's first languages were Italian and English, she would not have known how to respond had he said more. I remember hearing the words while growing up, but possessing little curiosity about them.

My father's efforts as a child to shed his old world stigma and become an American-speaking American were intense and deeply felt, and he had no interest in passing on to us a language that had declared him foreign. Imagine a little boy born in 1914, arriving at an elementary school in Brooklyn in 1919 or '20, not able to understand a word his teachers were saying and scrambling frantically to catch up. While leaping into English was and is a common plunge for immigrants' children, trying to burst through the language barrier seems emblematic of my father's lifelong labor and more expansively could be deemed the work of any fiction writer.

Something happens, a word comes to mind, but is it a word you can speak to those around you, one that will communicate to them what you wish to say, or is it Yiddish when you need English? English, when at home with your family, Yiddish is still the syntax conveying meaning. I imagine that tiny pause before your fluency is secure, that search and switch, the need to consider and how it might grow into a craftsman's habit, a blacksmith hammering one shape into another. Hammering in [unintelligible] experiences into words and often not the first words that come.

I imagine too, for my father, the experience of misunderstanding and being misunderstood contributed mightily to his desire to express himself eloquently and to have an audience that listened. Language was not my father's only leap. As a little boy, he lost his mother to mental illness and then later to an asylum and death when she was only 43 and he 15. Reading biographies have made me realize how many artists lost a parent early, and losses of every kind in the attendant grief are at the heart of our pursuit of language.

Recently in a piece about the poet, Denise Riley, and her grief after losing a son, Claire Willis notes about Riley, "She knows she's demanding something that no one can provide, a radical sharing of her own experience." I sense that both my father's early Yiddish and his mother's death pounded him in a similar place, making him lonely, tender, bruised, compelled and eager to master writing as a way of radically sharing his own experience. Really, isn't this the very urgency, the very effort we thank writers for, the one that lets us as readers have our private feelings and fantasies precisely named and reflected back, the one that offers an emotional connection of a sort that rarely so fully rests at hand in our daily lives.

This extraordinary extended reach, this offer of companionship, this gift of nuanced feeling and language, this assisted leap from silence into communion is what the best storytellers give us. It is why it is such a pleasure this evening, or at least one of the reasons, for us to be giving the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story to Lydia Davis. I can reach over to you, Lydia, and offer you that [unintelligible].

[presents a certificate]

Lydia: I can take it from you. [holds the certificate] Thank you for it. It's a lovely award. I'm so pleased to have it. What can I say? It's an honor and in memory of your father and your whole family.

Janna: Thank you.

Susan: Thank you and congratulations, Lydia. Again we can hear the applause and I'd like to thank everyone, but before we conclude, I would like to introduce our Executive Director, Gwydion Suilebhan.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello everyone. I am Gwydion and thank you so much to Lydia, Deborah, Lisa, Stephanie, American University, Susan, Janna and even her brother, Paul, for making tonight possible. We really couldn't do it without them and we couldn't do anything we do without all of you joining us. Thank you for making tonight a terrific and really meaningful event. Your participation completes the circle and we're very lucky to have you.

I want to close tonight by dropping a donation link back into the chat.

[Donate to PEN/Faulkner using this link! bit.ly/penfaulkner]

We know that literature has the power to make the distances between us smaller, to safely close the social distance.

The right story can make you feel seen and heard and understood and connected, and that's why we've kept all of our literary programs and our education programs going. I promise you, they have been going strong despite the conditions that we're all living through. We count on you, on your support to make sure that vital work can continue. Thank you so much for anything you can do for PEN/Faulkner and thank you again for joining us and celebrating the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. We hope you have a good night.

Lydia: Thank you, bye bye.

Gwydion: Bye everyone.

Susan: Goodnight. Thank you. Goodnight, Lydia.

Lydia: Goodnight.