Literary Conversations: Refuge

March 11, 2021

The PEN/Faulkner Foundation celebrates literature and fosters connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

If you're able to, please consider donating to PEN/Faulkner.

You can also purchase Souvankham Thammavongsa's *How to Pronounce Knife*, Abdi Nor Iftin's *Call Me American*, and Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* and *My Parents* from Politics & Prose.

Bethanne Patrick: Good evening. My name is Bethanne Patrick. I'm the VP and Programs Committee Chair at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. I'm so excited to have you all here with us tonight. We have a wonderful program. Our second Literary Conversation of the 2021 season, and it's called Refuge. Let me tell you a little bit about PEN/Faulkner, and then I'll introduce our amazing panelists and moderator.

For those of you joining us for the first time, what you should know about PEN/Faulkner is that we are a non-profit literary organization in the DC area with a mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities.

We fulfill our mission by administering two national literary awards, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the PEN/Malamud Award for Literary Excellence in the Short Story, as well as through our education programs, which bring free books and author visits to DC public and public charter schools. Our Literary Conversations series is now on its virtual platform. We are in the second season with this. It's just been a wonderful, wonderful response we've received from you, our participants.

A couple of notes about our webinar this evening. There will be a short Q&A session at the end of the event, so please feel free to submit your questions using the Q&A button at the bottom of the screen. You could also upvote your favorite questions and we'll do our best to get to them in the time we have. No promises, but we do try very hard to answer whatever we receive.

We're very proud to have adopted a Pay-What-You-Will model for our literary conversations in order to increase accessibility to our programs during these tough times. If you're able, please consider making a donation to us through a link that we'll put up in the chat. Any amount you give will go directly towards ensuring that we can continue to provide high-quality programming for our audiences across the country, and now, even in other places in the world.

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It's time to get this conversation started. We are so honored to have some incredible people tonight on our panel about refuge. Here they are in no particular order. I'm going to introduce our panelists and then our moderator.

Aleksandar Hemon is the author of *The Question of Bruno* and *Nowhere Man*. Both from Vintage. *The Lazarus Project, Love and Obstacles, The Making of Zombie Wars, The Book of My Lives,* and *My Parents: An Introduction / This Does Not Belong To You* is a memoir that

came out in 2019. Aleksandar is working on this next novel tentatively titled *The World and All That It Holds*, as well as a work of nonfiction, *How Did You Get Here?: Tales of Displacement* oral histories. That's coming out from Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

How Did You Get Here? was a recipient of a PEN/Jean Stein Grant for literary oral history in 2017. Hemon is the winner of the 2020 Dos Passos Prize. He co-wrote the script for *The Matrix 4* with David Mitchell and Lana Wachowski.

Abdi Nor Iftin lives in Maine currently. He is studying political science at the University of Southern Maine and plays soccer each Saturday, or did in the before times with a melting pot league of immigrants and American citizens. He is just an amazing author, and we're really looking forward to hearing from him.

Souvankham Thammavongsa, who is our third author on the panel, was born in the Laos refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand, and raised and educated in Toronto where she joins us from tonight. She is the award-winning author of four books of poetry and her fiction has appeared in *Harper's, Granta, The Paris Review, Ploughshares, Best American Nonrequired Reading 2018,* and *The O. Henry Prize Stories 2019.*

Last but far from least, our moderator Matthew Davis is the founding director of the Alan Cheuse International Writers Center at George Mason University. He's the author of *When Things Get Dark: A Mongolian Winter's Tale* and his work has appeared in *The New Yorker, The Atlantic, The Washington Post Magazine, Gamecca,* among other places. He has been an Eric and Wendy Schmidt Fellow at New America, a Fellow at the Black Mountain Institute at UNLV, and a Fulbright Fellow to Syria and Jordan.

With that, I am very happy to turn things over to Matt Davis, our moderator. I hope you enjoy the program this evening. Thank you so much for being with us.

Matthew Davis: Hello, everybody. How is everyone this evening? Thank you, Bethanne, for that lovely introduction as we all come on screen. I hope everyone is doing well. Here in the DC area was a lovely day. Thank you for spending a lovely evening with us tonight.

We're going to start with readings from all the panelists, all the writers that are here. We're going to start with Abdi. I'm going to ask for Abdi to please share a brief reading with us to start us off. Abdi?

Abdi Nor Iftin: Thanks, Matt. I'm going to read from my memoir, *Call Me American,* which came out on June 20th – which happens to be my birthday, not a real birthday, I don't even know when I was born – 2018. The chapter I'm reading from is called The Message From Mogadishu. It's on page 199 of the book. Here we go.

Abdi reading from *Call Me American*:

“There was a bomb in the house,” I told my brother. “I can still smell the powder. Everything is destroyed. I have nowhere to sleep. Tell Team Abdi it is a scary night.”

That night I slept at the corner of the street, in a dusty space behind a neem tree. When I woke up in the morning, I learned that Team Abdi had put together five hundred dollars to buy me a

plane ticket out of Somalia. I did not yet know where I would fly to, but I would need to get a passport.

I went to the government immigration office downtown. The guard at the gate sneered at me.

“A passport costs eighty dollars,” he said.

I fished a hundred-dollar bill out from my pants and unfolded it in front of him. His look of disdain changed to respect as he opened the gate. The clerk inside took my picture. I filled out some forms. Within an hour I was clutching my new Somali passport. That was the easy part. Where was I going? What country would give me an entry visa?

While I was getting my passport, Team Abdi learned that I could fly directly from Mogadishu to Kampala and get a one-day Ugandan visa upon landing. That would give me twenty-four hours to find a way from there into neighboring Kenya. I went to the airline agency at KM4, showed my passport, and bought a ticket to Kampala. The clerk didn’t have to ask if it was one-way.

My flight was in three days. The safe thing would have been to lie low in Mogadishu until then, but I could not leave without saying good-bye to my mom. So the day before my flight, I stashed my plane ticket and phone under the debris of our house and made the dangerous minibus journey one last time to the miserable Eelasha camp.

The first roadblock was manned by government soldiers and was easy enough, they just asked where people were going and checked to see no one had long beards. After that we entered al-Shabaab territory, and the road was blocked by about ten checkpoints. At every one the bearded fighters would board the bus and make sure all the women were sitting in the back and not touching any men. Then they looked around at the men, checking their haircuts and their teeth for brown qat stains, which would indicate a non-Islamist and possibly a government spy. Anyone who looked suspicious was dragged off the bus. Someone suspected of working for the government might get beheaded on the spot. Men with hair too long might only be forced to endure a rough haircut. I was glad I did not have my plane ticket, that would have surely spelled death. I forced myself to show no fear on my face. I just acted like a regular guy who lived in the camps, liked al-Shabaab, and had gone to run errands in the city. But inside I was trembling that someone would recognize me as the recruit who had deserted after just one day.

Mom was cooking over a fire outside her new hut when I arrived. I whispered to her that I was leaving the next day on an airplane, and she stopped stirring her pot. She could think of nothing to say. Finally she told me she was happy and that this was a good thing. I said good-bye to Nima and told them both not to tell anyone of my plans.

“Wherever we end up, I’ll see you when I see you,” I said. Then I shook hands with my mom; under al-Shabaab it was forbidden even for a mom and grown son to hug, and there was no point in risking attention.

The bus back to Mogadishu was scary because the fighters didn’t like to see people leaving the camps. I was pulled out and interviewed three times. I made up so many stories—I was going to protect our house from burglars, I was going to fetch clothes for my mom, whatever I could think of. Every time they let me go. That night I slept for the last time in my hidey-hole, which I had cleared of enough debris in order to crawl in.

The next morning my mom showed up. She had taken a bus from the camp.

“Mom, why are you here?” I was worried her presence would attract attention.

“I wanted to say good-bye to you,” she said.

We walked together to the airport. I had no bag, no extra clothes, nothing that would look like I was going on a journey—just a guy taking a walk. Carefully hidden in my clothes were my plane ticket, my passport, my freshly charged phone, and seventy dollars.

The airport terminal entrance was guarded by Ugandan troops from the African Union mission. A soldier barked at us: “Only passengers allowed!”

I fished out my ticket. He inspected it warily.

“You may enter,” he said. “Not her.”

I turned to Mom. “So this is finally good-bye,” I said.

“Good-bye, my son. I am so happy for you, and I will pray for you.”

Abdi: That's the end of it.

Matt: Thank you, Abdi. That's the end of your harrowing account of leaving Somalia, but in many ways, you've had an incredible journey before that and then another incredible one is what happened to you once you do leave Somalia. I was really struck later on in the book when you do land in the United States. The first job that you get after you get to the United States is you were working for an insulation company. You're meeting all these men that are working for the insulation company and you're having a little bit of a hard time with them, both figuring them out and the way that they're treating you.

It's an amazing passage that you write because you compare the tribalism that you experienced in Somalia to the tribalism that caused you to leave the country, that's tribalism that has caused your country so much difficulty, and you compare them with the tribalism being exhibited by your co-workers in the United States, even though they would probably never acknowledge that it was a form of tribalism. I was so struck by this because I think so much of the conversations about refugees or immigrants in this country and the challenges, they revolve around the challenges of assimilation, of the struggle of fitting into the host country or culture.

There's often so very little conversation about the insights and knowledge that people like yourself bring to and about our country. I was wondering if there are other examples besides this one of tribalism where your life in Somalia provided you with insights into the United States, in the new place that you had found a home.

Abdi: Thanks, Matt. What is so interesting is now it's six years since I have moved to the United States. Day one, right at the airport, the first time I landed in the US from Kenya, it was so striking that you have to fill up some forms, and as you sign the paper, it felt like I was shedding a layer. I'm no longer a Somali. Actually, I'm no longer an African by birth or [unintelligible]. In other words, I had become somebody else, a combination of two words, an African-American or the Black man.

I fit in that box with millions of others who live in this country. We speak different languages, practice different cultures, different faiths, and all of that. That, to me, was striking because I have not lived in a way that I could identify that way. Somalis are very proud of their clan stories and we're all connected to our families and the family becomes the clan. That is how I grew up. That's what I understand. It's a pretty homogenous society. We don't really have several languages and several different colors.

The interesting thing that you mentioned in Maine, my first job, I think every day that I wake up going to that job, I was feeling numb all over my body because there was no way I could fit in as much as I tried until I realized eight hours, nine hours, I'm working with these folks, I feel like I don't exist. To them, it's not only that I'm a Black man, but it's also they see me as a stranger, somebody who doesn't fit into their lifestyle. They are not only Americans, but they are also tribalistic manners. They stick to themselves and they have the accent.

Other folks are even something like outsiders, but then let alone a Black man who has an accent, who just got in and practices Islam. These all things seemed to them – I don't fit in and as much as I tried, it didn't work out. I'm glad I was at least communicative and I said, "Is there anything that I could explain? If you want to ask me about my story, I'm happy to tell, but if you treat me as someone who doesn't understand the sarcasm," because I think that's one thing – they have been laughing so hard, they would just throw one sarcasm out there and I couldn't get it and then they make fun of it. They talked about it for the whole week like, "He didn't get it."

That doesn't mean I am less. The thing is, I speak a language myself that I perfected everything. I could make jokes, and if you were new to Somali, if you have just been learning Somali, I wanted to help you. That's one thing I didn't receive with these folks. That was definitely quite a shocking experience to start with in the state of Maine. In general, it's America. America identifies you by the skin color.

As I walk around every day, I'm no longer the tribal guy who comes from Somalia, I become a Black man. That's the description that I have. The funny thing is, is that okay with me? Do I like to be identified by the skin color? I'm not sure if it's okay with me or not, but it's just a little strange. I don't fit into that way of life where I would like to be identified by skin color. I like to be humanized. If you want to humanize me, just treat me as a human being like everybody else. But we're in America.

Matt: Thank you for that. I appreciate that answer. We're going to talk a lot about these issues later on in the course of the evening. I want to turn to Souvankham and ask her if she could read a bit from her work and then talk to her for a bit. Souvankham?

Souvankham Thammavongsa: Thanks, Matt. Just hearing Abdi talk about coming to the country, it reminded me of my own parents when they had never heard of snow before. The closest thing they knew that was cold was ice cubes. When they landed, they said, "Oh my gosh, look at all those ice cubes." I wasn't even dressed properly. I was a one-year-old. I had bare feet, and a sponsor who sponsored my family from the Lao refugee camp in Nong Khai, Thailand took off his fur hat and put my feet in them so that I wouldn't be cold. We didn't know the language or each other. Did we have to know? That act itself was so important and made my family feel so safe.

I'm going to read from my short story collection, I'm going to read a story called “Randy Travis.” For those of you who don't know, perhaps because you're very young, Randy Travis is a country

music singer and he was very famous. He still is to me anyway, and just so you know, I am a fan of Randy Travis.

Souvankham reading from *How to Pronounce Knife*:

The only thing my mother liked about the new country we were living in was its music. She especially loved American country music because it reminded her of the way the women in her family talked among themselves. It felt familiar. The pleas, the gossip, the dreams of the big city, what it was like to come from a place no one had ever heard of. The songs always told a story you could follow–ones about heartbreak, or about love, how someone can promise to love you forever and ever, Amen.

The songs my mother loved most were by Randy Travis. My father was nothing like Randy Travis. No one noticed who he was or what he did for his living. He was no star. He was no leading man. He packed store furniture into cardboard boxes for a living. No one will pay to see him sing. My father thought it was ridiculous to be moaning about love so much. What kind of man was Randy Travis, with his health, his looks, his fame, and his money, that he should ever have anything to cry about?

One morning, my mother gave me some money to buy one of those teen magazines so we could find a mailing address for Randy Travis. She brought out a card printed with a pink heart on the front, but because she couldn't read or write English, she told me to write a note to him for her. I did not know what to write. I must have been about seven. What could I know then about the language of adult love? While she curled a few strands of her hair around a finger and broke out in small fits of giggles, I stood there, unable to decide how to even begin a sentence to him.

I didn't like how she was acting, and I was afraid of what would happen to my father if Randy Travis ever wrote back.

I wrote, *I do not like you*.

My mother would never know what I had written.

I told her, I wrote, *I love you forever and ever*, just like his song said.

She smiled, and then signed her name underneath.

We sent these cards to Randy Travis again and again. Though no one ever wrote back, my mother insisted we keep on sending them. I tried to think of what to write and thought of the things people wrote in the bathroom at school or spray-painted on the brick outside our building, *You're ugly. Go back home. Loser.* We must have sent out hundreds of these cards, spending money on stamps and envelopes, my mother always hoping to get something back. It wasn't any different than what she had done to come to this country, she said.

Souvankham: Thank you.

Matt: Thank you, Souvankham. That was beautiful. I loved this collection of stories and I loved “Randy Travis” in particular. I'm so glad you decided to read from it. It's an amazing collection. I think there's a line at the beginning of this short story, “Randy Travis.” It's – you write, a laugh in

any language was a laugh. Your stories, including the one that you read from, there's just an incredible amount of humor in them, even when you're exploring really difficult emotional terrain, like the excerpt you just read from.

I'm wondering how you, as a writer, how you decide to weave humor into your writing and how does laughter sometimes supersede cultural barriers like language? Because I think that's exactly right. How does humor weave into your work, and how does laughter and humor supersede that cultural barrier?

Souvankham: Well, any time that we hear about immigrants and refugees, they're always incredibly sad or they're very traumatic stories. From my own life and from my own family, I know that we have a wider view of ourselves. We're also incredibly funny, rambunctious, loud and we've felt the complicated feeling of being ungrateful. I wanted the stories to pick out other feelings to talk about.

One of the things that my stories don't do is try to explain that the people in the stories are human beings. I assume that you know. For me, it's not a big deal to be a refugee. Everyone we know, everyone we're surrounded by is – what is a big deal is to be a writer. When you notice the laughter, it means so much to me as a writer because you're noticing a feature that is so important to my stories.

Laughter is power. If you can turn a situation and reframe it and make the people around you see what you see and laugh along with you. Also, it can be divisive when someone tells a joke, who's in that joke, who's outside of it, what does it cost to tell that joke? I'm thinking in particular of laughter when I didn't know how to pronounce the word knife when I was a little kid. When I came home, my parents didn't make me feel embarrassed or ashamed about not knowing the language. Instead, we made fun of everybody at school. My dad said, "What the hell? There's a letter right there. It's the first letter. Why put it there and not pronounce it and these people call themselves educated? What's that all about?"

Or if I have a hole in my shoe and my parents couldn't buy me a new shoe, my parents wouldn't go on about the fact that they couldn't afford a shoe. They would say, "Well, summer is coming, and it's just air conditioning, natural air conditioning. Your shoe will be the rage when summer comes around." Then we would laugh and we would forget that we couldn't get me a new shoe.

Matt: That's a beautiful response. Thank you. That image that you started with when you were talking about, Abdi, about putting your foot in his hat was also just an amazing image. Someone that knows a lot about humor and laughter is Sasha. Your works often have humor coursing through them. I wonder if you can share with us a reading from one of your works.

Aleksandar Hemon: My parents also came as refugees to Canada. I was in the United States at the time because I had arrived a little earlier, so different, longer story but I wrote a book about my parents called *My Parents* and the life before and after their displacement. They left Bosnia in the early '90s because there was a war. They still live in Canada. I wrote a book in which I wanted to engage with the way they think about the world and how displacement affected the way they think about the world.

This is from the chapter on food, which is by far the longest chapter in the book.

Aleksandar Hemon reading from *My Parents*:

The value and meaning of food is always necessarily altered, just like everything else, by displacement. For one thing, “our” food is either unavailable or scarce in the new place—at least it was at the beginning. Therefore, it becomes a mark of loss, which makes it essential for all nostalgic discourse. For years after their arrival, my mother would deliver analytical soliloquies on, say, the ineffable, yet substantial, differences between “our” sour cream and the Canadian (“their”) kind. The authenticity of “our” food exactly matches the authenticity of our life in the past. Conversely, the inauthenticity of our life in displacement can be tasted in “their” food. In Mama’s discourse, “our” sour cream is a stable category, possessing unchanging qualities correlating to the unchanging, authentic principles that guided our previous life—the principles that were violated and, indeed, destroyed by the war and subsequent displacement. “Our” food, in other words, stands for the authentic life we used to live, which is no longer available except as a model for this new, elsewhere life. It is therefore important that food-related practices from the previous life be reconstructed in the new context. The food, if made properly, might be where authenticity is partially restored despite the displacement. While that authenticity was available in the previous life, it requires tremendous effort to rebuild it in the new one, where the torturous possibility that nothing could ever be the way it used to be is continuously present, like a big nose on a face.

This idea is best expressed in a story I heard in Sarajevo from someone who had heard it from someone else, who, in turn, knew the person who knew the person to whom all this happened. In short, the story is as true as can be, even if I fact-checked none of it, because it accumulated relevant experiences and value while passing through other people.

So: A Bosnian refugee—let’s call him Zaim—ends up in some small town in England. Life is tough, there are few friends, the family is far away, the longing for Bosnia is painful. Zaim develops a craving for spit-roasted lamb, the most universally revered food in Bosnia. He wants to do it the way it’s supposed to be done—stick a whole lamb on a spit and then slowly revolve it for hours over fire and embers, sipping beer and talking to people, until it’s finished. Though piecemeal lamb is available in English butcher shops, a whole one is not. Spit-roasting a whole lamb is quite a different proposition from roasting a leg in the kitchen oven; for one thing, with the leg of lamb, the ritualistic, communal aspect is absent. There is one place, however, where Zaim could get a whole, live lamb: a pet store. Zaim purchases a cute little lamb at a pet store, and it even has a cute little name; wholly unfazed by the cuteness, he slaughters the lamb and spit-roasts it. But this is England, where pet welfare is far more important than the longings of a carnivorous refugee. A municipal representative knocks on Zaim’s door to visit the little lamb and check on its well-being. “Lamb go away,” Zaim says in his bad English, but the visitor does not understand. “Lamb go away,” he says: the lamb escaped.

Whether the pet welfare official believed him enough to summon a municipal posse that could search English meadows for the lost little lamb, I do not know. But the story continues in the United States, where Zaim is re-displaced, landing in some town rife with malls and megamarkets. There is everything there, except, of course, a whole lamb, which he cannot find even at PetSmart. In his profound craving for spit-roasted lamb, Zaim purchases all the pieces needed to assemble a whole lamb: the head, the neck, the breast, the shoulders, the chops, the ribs, the legs. When he collects all the necessary parts, he staples them together. So there it is: a monstrous lamb, which man and history rent asunder but is now put back together by a determined Bosnian, who, beer in hand, proudly and slowly revolves his ovine Frankenstein over the fire. Despite the heroic effort, it still doesn’t taste the same.

Matt: Thank you, Sasha. That was great. I was particularly struck by the phrase that you used to describe your parents' experience as elsewhere life. It was fascinating for me because elsewhere seems a little bit of an improvement to *Nowhere*, which is the title of your first novel, which is a really iconic novel. I wanted to ask you a question about that, about *Nowhere Man* because it's been almost 20 years since that novel was published.

I wonder, looking back, how you think about that book now as you've had some distance from it, and where you think your main character, Jozef Pronek might be right now, today, if you would have fast-forwarded his life 20 years from now.

Aleksandar: Well, I don't know. I haven't read that book in a while but it's largely because I kind of internalized it. I contain whole scenes and moments from the book. I would think it shows if Pronek is semi-successfully aging, and he's probably stuck somewhere on Zoom like the rest of us.

I have not thought about the possibility that he could extend his or continue his fictional life, rather. I wonder what he would say about these four years of Trumpism, but this is the fifth year of Trumpism, just a different reshuffle, and how he would have experienced that – it's something to ponder.

I think I'm one of those people who keeps writing about the same thing but looking for new forms to address the same thing and that is this crucial factor in my life and my family's life and that even goes back a few generations and that is displacement. In my family, no one dies in the country where they were born. That's for a few generations. In some ways, we all live elsewhere constantly and it is a mode of living. It's one of the things I dealt with in the book about my parents. If you cannot carry your property and money and wealth around, what is it that you pass on from one generation to another, right?

Could be stories and language, but that often gets lost in transition if kids are born and raised in different countries. So what is it? People who have grown up and lived in the same country their entire life, from families that – they have always lived in that country at least for a few generations, I think they have a fundamentally different perception of the stability and continuity of the world.

For me and my family constantly operate with the assumption of possible catastrophe. The intensity changes. It's not a paranoia. There's always a real possibility, we analyze, scan the world for that possibility. As bad as that is, it requires imagination, and also you have to narrativize those catastrophes, the past, present, and future catastrophes. It generates a particular kind of – That could be funny. I have to tell you to generate a particular kind of imagination, a particular relationship to the place where we are because no place after the original place seems permanent. Even if it is, it is just that.

Matt: Yes. Abdi and Souvankham, feel free to jump in here but I'm also just very curious to – This Literary Conversation is entitled Refuge and there is a sense that the three of you each came to North America in very different ways. Even though all three of you are in many ways displaced from your home country. I wonder if any of you want to discuss a little bit about how your conceptions of refuge at home have evolved over the years since you've left from where you were born.

Souvankham, I know you were very young when you came here, obviously, but your family left. How has that idea of refuge at home evolved for you both as a person but also as a writer?

Souvankham: When I write books, everyone wants to not talk about the book, but to talk about my biography like, where my parents are from, where I was born, and attach me to that country. I was born in a refugee camp, and in a refugee camp, you're not given a birth certificate. While I can say that I was born in Thailand, I am not Thai and the Thai don't recognize me as a citizen. My parents are from Laos, but I have never been there myself.

While we value a government document, like a passport, the rules of what makes you a citizen can change any second. The only place where I feel I've made something permanent and real is when I open a book and next to the copyright mark I see my name. That to me is as powerful as a birth certificate that proves that I'm here, that I made something, and that I'm real. Because what I've made is a book, no one can take that from me. The only time I feel refuge is in the art that I make.

Matt: Great, thank you. Abdi or Sasha, you want to respond or take that on?

Aleksander: I recognize Souvankham's thinking about the sovereignty and the homeliness of the text of literature writing of being in a place. It becomes an imaginary home, it is the place where no one asks you to explain yourself because you are having full control of presentation and self-representation. No one can get into it unless you let them in. Also, I think it's an important aspect in talking about refugees and immigrants too, and citizens of various countries. One of the ways to measure the difference is the sense of agency that one has.

People who are kicked out of their own homes, they don't shop for the best country to go to, they go where they can, if they can at all. Their levels of agency are smaller, and I think there's a very basic law in the way people behave in the world, they move toward the space where they have more agency. Where there's more food, or more jobs, or more schools, or more loving people, wherever it is, where a person can engage with the world and other people in it with dignity, self-respect, and agency.

That's the logic of migration. Then we know what happens when people are not let in. When they are let in but their agency is diminished because they are taken to be second-class citizens legally or effectively. A lot of people, a lot of writers from Nabokov to Souvankham, I think, and me, for sure, is finding a place where you have a sense, where one has a sense that one can exercise some agency, that one can rethink one's life and experiences and imagine alternative lives. Just find ways to have at least narrative agency in the world in which other forms of agency are not necessarily available.

I don't want to talk too much but when I went back to Sarajevo after the war and siege, I hadn't seen people from before the war. They were telling me stories from the siege and speaking of humor how they survived. It's horrible, the longest siege in European history, modern history at least, how they survived. By and large, many of those stories were funny. This was in '97, and I have been thinking about it ever since.

I don't want to get into a long answer but the basic answer, they got to tell the story as they wished and change its value. They survived and the laughter was the triumph. I can tell the story of my suffering any way I wish, and I will tell it as a funny story. Therefore, prove to whoever wants me to prove that I have survived indeed.

Abdi: Right. That's an interesting question. I would like to add, when I started working on my book a few years ago now, I had realized that I wasn't thinking in English, clearly, I wasn't dreaming in English. I started pouring my thoughts and memories in the way that I feel and the way that I feel comfortable and I understand my own story, which basically was my native language. Just because I didn't grow up here, I've just migrated here in the fall of 2014, and then I started working on the book in late 2017.

What's very interesting, speaking about literature and how you feel about home and where's home, I have almost daily conversations with my childhood friends, those who survived the war. None of them are currently in our country, none of them are home. People have scattered, some have crossed the desert, some have crossed the ocean, some have been very lucky to catch a flight like myself and get as far as here.

What's very interesting is how we really enjoy going back to those sweet memories, or maybe [unintelligible] memories back home. We tell about in a very funny way, we could start telling a story that had been in 1997 at a time when we started playing with some sort of an IED. We didn't understand and then how we walked away from it and then it just exploded. We could have died, it was like a 10-second, 20-second thing.

To know each other now that we're alive and to go back to those memories, and that my friend is talking to me on WhatsApp or on Facebook, where his kids are behind him running around or making a noise, that makes me really – just for a minute, close my eyes, and say there's a reason why this is actually happening. We see ourselves as the satellite of our stories – we're now looking at everything from above, bird's eye view, back to these stories.

These were actually the major reasons why I wanted to work on a book because otherwise, these memories escape us. I can't be remembering everything as the years go by so I realized, wow, hold on, these memories are very, very fresh in my mind. It just literally has just happened. It wasn't that long ago when I left Somalia and crossed the border into Kenya. It wasn't that long ago when I was a refugee and I still have my refugee papers in the pocket. You never know if you're going to lose it so why don't I start working on a book, which just becomes my identity like you were saying, Souvankham. That is how you see beingness like, you've really made it.

I don't have a degree in literature, I actually – I'm someone who's never been to high school or middle school. Realizing that you are the idea behind this story that is getting into schools and that people are reading, that is home to me. That is what makes me feel – See myself as this person and see where I live, America, as an idea that we all fit in. I think that's how I could see myself.

Matt: It's interesting, Abdi, hearing you talk about longing. There's a sense of longing for the home country in some ways that – Sasha you read about food, and Souvankham, in one of your stories, you write a little bit about how, especially the Laotian men, are longing for the privilege that they had in Laos as doctors and lawyers and who are now digging worms from the ground to make a living.

Abdi, you have, in your experiences in Maine, the many Somalis who are longing for the order and the strictness of Islam in some ways in religion that doesn't exist in the United States. I wonder for each of you how that complication, or how that desire for longing, maybe nostalgia, but how that complicates the idea of identity for you and then for your characters that you write about.

Aleksandar: I've written about nostalgia in various ways and nostalgia is kind of retroactive utopia. It's the past devoid of all the ugly things. It contains purified mythologized, if you wish, memories of home, from smells to other things. There are differences in kinds of nostalgia. There's the nationalist nostalgia, people who think Let's Make America Great Again because they fantasize about this pure, clean place that somehow foreigners spoil for them.

A personal story is always fragmentary and complicated, can never be put back together. Everyone, unless they're totally delusional, think that it's not available. You cannot go back to the place. The only difference is degrees of sadness, if you wish. To me, that is extremely narratively interesting.

People create stories of their life before, so as to do at least two things, one of them to validate their life here because when people come here, particularly the refugees, they're immigrants too. The common attitude is, "We don't know who you are, where you came from. You're practically nothing until you prove to us somehow that you have an actually valid, legitimate history of being a human being." This is what a lot of immigrants and refugees, they have to explain themselves why. You even have benevolently asking people, "Why are you here? Where are you from?" Because Americans are not as self-evidently – people being self-evidently American. It's the history that we carry on our backs. It can only be narrative because the books, the libraries, the culture, it's hard to bring all that over here. Particularly after the war that destroyed it all.

The other thing is that, reflecting back on that, it allows for some narrative connection with the homeland. I cannot tell you how many people I know. They can talk about how great they used to be in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, but they hadn't been there for 15 to 20 years. Nostalgia, they may never go, partly because if they go, they might find out that they made up a lot of it. Or the fantasy of this idyllic past might be ruined. People then create these narrative landscapes in which they like to live. Then they might tell those stories to their children. Then they can develop fantasies about the former land, whereas the reality of that land, presently, is not always available to them, even with all the social media. We can click on a link right now and watch what's happening in Syria live, or in Somalia. It's both the connection and what separates people from the homeland, this constant nostalgic operation. It's the goal for a writer.

Souvankham: No one in my collection of short stories long for home. As the writer, I don't do the work of giving my characters or the reader their bearings. I just refer to the location in each of my stories with the word "Here". It's very plain and very, very tiny. Nobody knows where they are as a reader. One thing I want to avoid, not just for the reader or the characters I make, is this feeling of pity. I hate it. I don't want it. I don't pity my characters. Just thinking about nostalgia, none of my characters think back or give you a history lesson of where they come from, but they do say it is as if the life that they had before didn't count. Where they had been doctors and lawyers, they find themselves now picking worms or being managed by pimple-faced teenagers.

Abdi: Matt, I actually have a very good friend who's a very famous musician in Somalia, particularly in the '70s and '80s. He's a pretty old guy now. When we're talking about – the Michael Jackson of Somalia. Everybody knew his name, but then, because of the war, he left and found his way in North America. He's a cab driver, [chuckles] of course. For me to be able to become a translator and interpreter for him at the clinic or the doctor's office, I didn't know what it feels like. Is it a privilege or something like that? The words that I hear from him is, even though he hasn't been to Somalia in 30 years now, is that that is where his body has to go.

What he said was, "I'm descending." I'm like, "I've really had a great time. I had packed theaters when everybody came in and now I'm planning to go back. That's where I want my life to go like, be rested. I don't think this is the land where I liked my body." If you know, religiously, it doesn't really matter where your body goes. That has really touched me deeply.

That part where you mentioned in my memoir. Particularly in my roommates who said, "Hey. I'm saving up some money and I'd like to build a home back in Somalia. I'm not building a house here. That is where my family has to go. All we're waiting for is things to open up and peace to return." I think that the reason that people feel that way is, if you look at it, in every society, there are those [who are] privileged and there are those [who are] less privileged. To almost every character that is in my book who really wants to go back to Somalia are part of those who are privileged. Who feel we're the clan. Lives in this area. "If I go back, I could become the Sultan, or I could become a leader of some sort, whereas all I could do here is become a taxi driver. Work at the hotel. Between the two I would definitely choose that because I wouldn't be making money that way, but I would have a whole bunch of people that are just meeting me and hanging out with me, handshakes, and all the respect that people receive."

I think that is very naturally in all humans. Where do I stand in that? I'm not really privileged in Somalia. I've been very clear about that in my books. For example, now there's a system of governance in Somalia. It's 4.5. It's four major clans and 0.5 are the minorities. The minorities will never be able to have a position at the presidency, a prime minister, speakers of parliament. You can run for everything else. You can become a cabinet member, a parliament member, but you can't reach that level. Then it reminds me of the US – if you are not born here, you're not going to run for a president. Even in many cases, if you're born in this country, you still have to have certain connections and levels that you need to get to become a president. It squeezes me in-between and that's one of the reasons I'm not really interested in craving for going back.

Matt: It's interesting, or you can be a reality TV show star to become president in this country. I think that it's – Sasha, you've mentioned this a couple of times and it just was – some of the images that were used for this discussion tonight was the Statue of Liberty shattered in pieces. I do think if you're going to talk about refuge, if you don't have a home, especially if you're going to talk a little bit about refugees and immigrants, it's impossible not to address what the United States has just gone through the past four or five years. I think it really does beg the question, is North America, especially the United States, still a place that can welcome people from across the world that are seeking refuge, that are seeking home? That has sort of, in many ways, been our calling card as a country. Does that still exist? Or is that gone?

Aleksandar: Well, people go where they have more agency. The refugees and immigrants, they do not really shop for the best place necessarily. They show up for the relatively good place. I don't know, there are hundreds of thousands of refugees who can't get to Europe because they will not let them. There are people stuck in Bosnia and essentially dying in snow because the European Union has closed the borders and Bosnia is not part of the European Union and keeping them outside. They would be happy in Germany, just as well in Hungary even, never mind the United States. They're not sitting around the fire in Bosnia, "I think, Oh, let's go to the United States." They just, "Anywhere where there's food and agency is good enough."

I think it's part of American mythology, which is part of the Great American myth of exceptionalism, "This the best place in the world, [there's] no one nation like this in the world." Exceptions accepted from history, and the logic of fascism, and power, and imperialism, and colonialism.

Of course, it's better here than in Bosnia or in Somalia or anywhere else, but it doesn't mean that people who come here just think, "Give us Trump, he's so much better than the corrupt war criminal in Bosnia." Because it is a reality of this life now. What you can do with your agency in this place, here, as Souvankham said, "Here is where we are, wherever that is." I think people will come here, of course, because it's a vast land and there are spaces. All kinds of spaces.

I'm going to tell you that I am less American now than I was 10 years ago. Something broke and I live here. What happened with Trump – and it's not even that Trump was possible, it is this inability to see that Trump was possible by a lot of people and that he's still possible and that everything that happened was always possible. Not only possible, but probable, but there's so many people in this country who are so invested in this myth of American exceptionalism. I think I reached a point that pretty early in Trump's reign, I can't fight that. I cannot be explaining this all over again. To me, it was always clear that they will end up attacking the Capitol, always that the logic of their approach, if you wish, was going to end in violence. It is not over yet, I might tell you. Things have improved a little, but it is not over yet.

Souvankham: Maybe I'm an optimist but America also is Barack Obama and Kamala Harris. Seeing faces such as theirs in power that says something all over the world – that, too, is America.

Abdi: Well, first of all, let's really be clear. I think millions of Americans still believe that 90% of the refugees are coming to the United States. If you look at it, it's just the other way around. More than 90% of these refugees live in neighboring countries, Turkey, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, and other places. What we have is a very, very small number. Then this nation is built on migration. For those who first came when it started who were speaking French are now no longer doing that. Their kids have evolved into America. The Somalis who came to the United States in 1991 have children who are identifying themselves as African-Americans, right? That's how it continues.

I think, in some ways, America is connected to every continent in the world by nationality. You can see that actually basically happening. Wherever you go, there's a family who also has another family connected to them in the United States for many, many, many years. Why not visit? If you can't find what you're looking for, economic opportunities, if you graduate from University of Kampala and you can't find a job in your country, just because of the system, because of the guy who's running the country over 30 years, you have every fundamental right to decide where you want to go to.

It's human nature. We've migrated across borders forever. These whole man-made borders are still, in some ways, actually trying to level up, pushing the vulnerable ones away. That's the feeling of what Trump was saying. I just want to have seven countries not come to this country. That's the travel ban. In other words, the Muslim ban. Then, "Yes, I went to Ireland, Irish to come, English to come and everybody else."

As racist as that is – I think honestly if you look at it in other ways, it's just that America is connected to every country. People have been supporting their families from day one in 1800, 1700. There were Mexicans who were making money in the US and that money was going across the border, and it was building houses and communities elsewhere. That has been happening forever. That's why to answer the question, I think North America is definitely a destination. It may not be a number one destination, but I still believe it's one of the top destinations for the refugees.

Matt: Souvankham, for those of us that may be unfamiliar with how Canada may be similar or different than the United States in terms of how the country views itself and how maybe people who have come to the country as refugees or immigrants, how it views the country. Can you speak to that a little bit in terms of how that may differ from the US?

Souvankham: I can only speak about it as, you know, I'm not a lawyer or a social worker, I can speak about it in terms of what my family experienced. We also wanted to come to the US but my dad didn't have a job, he wasn't an engineer, he wasn't educated with a PhD or anything like that. What he did was he carved things out of wood. What is that in the world? It was easily interpreted or read as a communist. My family was not allowed to come to America.

It made – also because I did not have the birth certificate. My family had applied as refugees, but then my mother had me and so there was this undocumented third person, and that's just suspicious.

They don't know when you're applying how old you are or how dangerous you are, they just see this undocumented third person. The only document that I could have was a baptism certificate. That wasn't real or good enough for America. In Canada, the church was allowed to sponsor you as long as you had a baptism certificate. That's how my family ended up in Canada.

Matt: The idea of someone working with wood equates to communism – it's both horrifying, very bureaucratic. Also, I can see it in some ways.

We're going to move on a little bit to some Q&A's, the questions that the audience have posted. I want to encourage all of you who are watching and listening to feel free, to submit some questions. One that I'd like to ask is – one of the people wants to know – what is a question you wish you were asked about your books or your writing?

Aleksandar: I don't know if a single question can cover that. I think books are continuous communication. I would like to be involved in that communication beyond just the Q&A, but of course, that's difficult and impossible. It's not only that I like to talk, but writing a book, as my fellow writers know, it means making millions of very small decisions that are totally invisible to even the best of readers. Those decisions are my book and so I can talk about those decisions. I'm not sure that's useful to anyone, but I remember some of those decisions. I remember how it changed my understanding of many things, of language, of the world, of myself, of particular instances or situations because writing a book means changing the world. Not in a political sense, but it alters my perception.

Everything looks different after I have written a page, let alone a book, which is why I'm doing it. This is the agency that I'm talking about. It's a way to change the world or the perception of the world. I don't feel passive and just an object in the world.

Souvankham: I think I would like to maybe be asked – because I grew up in a home without books – maybe someone could ask, how do you become a writer if you haven't been surrounded by books or if you haven't encountered books early in your life? I would just pick up what Aleksandar had talked about in terms of the imagination. My family had an imagination and it costs nothing. Everybody has it, so use it. I think that is what guided me, even though I wasn't surrounded by books. I had an imagination and I was taught to use it.

Abdi: I'm with you Souvankham. Honestly, I did not grow up having books in the houses, but I think one question I really like people to ask is, how does it feel telling the story in the first person? Most of the time, it's a journalist who visits a refugee camp and writes about those stories or it's a filmmaker who puts together a documentary and it all goes in the third person. It's like, "Oh, I met this person." This family and those are all the books that I've actually read. I haven't had access to read a firsthand experience written by someone like myself who has actually lived in the Dadaab which used to be one of the largest refugee camps in the world.

Then all of the books that I visited before I wrote mine, picking up, collecting things and it was rare to find a piece written by refugees themselves. Those are the questions that I like people to think. How does it feel finally standing up for yourself and for your story and for your community, to say, "I don't want anybody to write about my story. I don't want to sign a contract with someone to walk away and for them to steal or take this story. I want to speak for myself." That is how you can change the world.

Matt: I want to follow up very quickly with Souvankham in terms of how you did become a writer because I am curious. You've mentioned the imagination. What were you reading? When did you begin to have your first reading experiences and what were those like as you were growing up in Canada?

Souvankham: I saw books in the school library and anytime you're in a school, you will encounter books. Anytime we read something, it was just so much fun. I wanted to make that thing. Now, of course, my parents are not connected to the publishing industry. If I wanted to pick worms or pluck feathers in a chicken processing plant, they knew exactly who to talk to, who I could go to talk to to make that happen.

I didn't know how to become a writer. I printed and bound my own books and sold it out of my school knapsack because I wanted to see my name on a bookshelf. I went to bookstores around Toronto and said, "Will you carry my book?" Then a publisher discovered me that way. She said that I don't have to print and bind it myself. She can do that. That's her job.

That was when it was really amazing to see that I could be a writer, that a writer can have a name like mine, can look like me, and can be on the bookshelf and in libraries and in schools – just like Abdi said – when you said it feels so good to see that your books are in schools and that – I share that feeling.

Matt: Abdi, you also, in your memoir, you talk a lot about learning English through movies in particular, and that was really where it sounds like you began to learn English from. What about when you began to think about becoming a writer more seriously? I know you were obviously there. Many radio stations, man in Mogadishu, I think is what they called you as a reporter and as just a diarist. When did you become more interested in literature and in reading and how that impacted you as you got older?

Abdi: Well, if you look back in Mogadishu when I was learning English, every time that I finished a movie, most of them action movies, *The Terminator, The Commandos*, interestingly enough, I would write all these curse words on the walls of Mogadishu. That is how writing started for me. I would paint something on the door of my room to let my mom know that she can't come in, stop, privacy, things like that, but she can't read so she came in anyways. Those are, interestingly enough, how it actually got me into some liking, expressing myself through words when you sometimes feel like speaking is not enough. You just have to print something out.

When I moved to Kenya, there were books available all over the place, very cheap and I collected as many as I could.

I had so much time on my hands. As refugees, they wouldn't let us go to school, find a job so there's so much time. I would read a whole novel within a day. My brother and I would read to each other sometimes. When I came to the United States, that's actually when I felt, this is the battlefield right here. This is where my words should come out and pour out in a paper and it started coming together.

Matt: That's really interesting, both of your answers. Sasha, there's a question for you specifically from one of the people that are listening tonight about which one of your books feels closer to you and why, and closer in the sense that it represents you better or in an essential way. In addition to that, do you feel more at home writing a short story or a novel? I guess now I would add to that, more and more, nonfiction.

Aleksandar: Well, as I was saying, that writing a book changes me and changes the way I look at the world. They represent who I was when I was writing them, but then I also changed that. It's both a track of some kind of evolution or degradation. I read them as though they're written by a family member who I know very, very well, but I really – it's not me. I don't read them often. I read them because I contained the memory of writing them. This book, it's the most recent one, but not only that, I think it was written with the sense, and a lot of thoughts, in relation to everything we're talking about. It was because I wrote about my parents, I think, that it contains a lot of love for them in there. It's inescapably – if one writes fiction or even in a first-person, there's a certain amount of solipsism.

I'm speaking now about myself obliquely or directly. It is a way to have a voice and to be in the world. It's not necessarily selfish. There's a different quality in the book. When I was working on this book I knew most of the stories. I would sit down and listen to my parents and I was not known for listening to my parents in the family. They would tell me about themselves. We've had good relationships and loved each other, but somehow opened new spaces relatively late in our life. To me, that changed me in a way that I still feel and now that I hadn't seen them for a year because I can't go to Canada, I really miss them. When I miss them, I call them on the phone and speak for five minutes, and then I read about them in my book.

Matt: Sasha, can you just speak a little bit to the differences of experiences between yours and your parents, different countries, different times? What have been similarities and what have been quite different? They also came as a couple, presumably, whereas you were single.

Aleksandar: Well now, I have about a hundred family members in Ontario alone, and then some in Alberta and elsewhere. My tribe has moved to Canada, pretty much. When they landed, they were the first ones and they were in their 50s. They couldn't speak English. It was very different. They were traumatized by this, wandered around for a couple of years, they were traumatized in various ways. I had no money. I was working minimum wage jobs. I would take a train from Chicago where I lived, it took me forever. They managed to deal with that. I remember when Souvankham was talking about the difference between Canada and the United States or her family's experience in Canada. They had English classes for six months first because they couldn't speak English really.

My dad quit because he was too nervous. He needed to get a job. He just could not stand learning and the situation was, we had no bread to eat – this is the way he would put it. Then he

found a job. He was an engineer with no college degree, but he found a maintenance job in the factory. Then he called me and said, "I can get this job, but I don't have tools. Do you have money to pay for the tool, $250 Canadian?" I didn't have that. I didn't have the money because I was just paying the rent and for food. I said, "Talk to your social worker." They had a social worker who then promptly lent him $250 and he got the job and he paid it back. This is news only to Republicans, I suppose, but you actually help people. People can return that and then they help the next wave and so on.

Canada is complicated and it's not ideal in many ways. I'm well aware of the stories, but to them, this is what they remember nearly 30 years later, that at some point, someone, not just the – There were other Canadians, random citizens who were kind to them, but the government person was kind to them, active. There was a government policy that helped them when it could and that is invaluable. With all the nostalgia and longing for home and loss and all that, they're very proud Canadians, they vote, and they know who their Ontario premier is, and they don't like him and all that state. They're involved.

Matt: That's interesting. That's great. I want to ask a question that someone wrote in about the stories, that – who gets to tell refugee stories. The question is, I'd like to pick up on the point of non-refugees writing stories about their refugee experience. The question is, who has a right to tell that narrative and perhaps benefit from it? I've read far too many fetishizing it and missing the mark yet being lauded.

[silence]

Abdi: Was that a question, Matt?

Matt: Yes, I'm sorry. The question is, who has the right to tell the narrative and the story of refugees?

Abdi: I think anyone who owns the story has to tell the story. That's how it works, or you can tell the story if your family, if they are not around, or if they want to share it with you so that you can share it with the world. I think, for example, I had permission from my mother to tell her story in my book. It's her story, but, it's a family story and then at some point, there are things that I was never told as a child that you learn about as you take your time communicating with your parents.

This is one of the amazing things during my writing process, where my mom would go on and on and on talking about these things that she's never told us in our lives, but now she feels like it's the right time and I feel like it's the right time, it's perfect. There were reasons why she did not want to tell us those stories, but then speaking about other folks who are checking the stories of refugees and writing about those refugees, and they're the authors, and they're the beneficiaries of whatever comes out of that book, an award, or money and stuff like that, I really feel it is – to me, it's just that I wish the story was told in the first person because it has its own flavor and it's [unintelligible] when people really tell their stories because the person who's telling the story, when COVID ends, will be the one who shows up at the local library and bookstore, who is going to sign your book. You're the author who actually wrote this story.

If it's a nonfiction, and it's about you, and it's about your family. Then if it's a fiction, it's just – you are the mastermind, you have an idea of what this story is about and all that. I think in short, I would really prefer that if people who have this story should tell their stories.

Matt: Other thoughts from Souvankham or Sasha?

Aleksandar: Souvankham, you want to go?

Souvankham: Even when it's fiction, you have to make it feel real. I think the power really is not the writer who has the power to tell the story, I think the power lies in the reader. A reader has to learn how to be discerning. For example, earlier, Aleksandar talked about, when you tell the story of a really traumatic event because you survived it and you lived it, that story or that scene is one of triumph and incredible laughter. I have that scene in one of my short stories where the father is gathered around with his friends, and they're talking about what it was like being a refugee, and they were trading stories that made themselves laugh, and I feel only you can – You can imagine things and you can make them up in fiction, but that moment, it had to come from real knowledge, real lived experience. I'm not interested in exploring refugees and immigrants as a topic. I know. And that comes across in the writing and I think a discerning reader would be aware of that, can see that, can feel that.

Aleksandar: Yes, I think that there is a bearing witness aspect to the literature produced by just about everyone, but there's an added value by people who have been displaced or migrated from one place to another because we carry our culture in our backpack, right on our back, in that way. Like Abdi, when I was writing nonfiction featuring my friends and family, I had to run it by them – it wasn't so much fact-checking, but it was their story, too. You cannot simply own it. I don't know who has a right, certainly not legal rights, when everyone can write whatever they want, there's freedom of speech and all that, but I think the measure to me is, or the difference rather, is that I can write whatever book I write, and it could be extremely successful but if this community that I come from sees that book as somehow betraying or lying about their experience, I would not be able to overcome that in my head, there would be a total defeat – not defeat, it's not a battle, but rather, how would I put it – a fiasco or a failure of the writing project.

It's not that I don't have to worry about it, I'm not afraid of that because I have – I cannot represent a whole people, certainly not a whole experience of war and displacement and all that, it is not up to me, it's not up to a single person. It has to be a community quorum. The more people speak from that experience, the better. By necessity, it cannot – Not a lot of people [who] are not from that community could be writing about that. I'm not an expert on this, but what often happens, if people from outside of the community write about refugees, or migrants or all that, their modus operandi is empathy or sort of empathy porn, tormenting the subject so it should generate empathy and then the readers, if they feel empathy, they can confirm their ethical position as proper, because they feel bad for these people. I don't write for empathy within my group of people, for sure, and I don't really care outside of it as empathy, because it's more than that.

I don't know. I will be presumptuous and say that Abdi and Souvankham might agree with this, but I don't just write because I'm a refugee or immigrant, I want to make literature, but from my experience which is marked by displacement. It's not just about displacement and immigrants, it is my theme, what I write about, but if it's reduced to that, it is diminished, but also I own it, it's mine, this is where I come from, these are my people, this is my history. This is what I know.

Matt: That's beautiful. Thank you, Sasha. I think the image or the idea of putting culture in a backpack too will stick with me as we move forward. I think we're going to have to end here for the evening. I really want to thank all of our panelists, Abdi, Sasha, Souvankham, it was a pleasure to engage in conversation with all of you. I really want to thank PEN/Faulkner, for

hosting this event. With that, I am going to bring on Gwydion Suilebhan, the Executive Director of PEN/Faulkner, who's going to say a few final words and send us off into this beautiful night. Thank you very much. It was a pleasure to speak with you all.

Gwydion: Hello, everyone. Thank you so much. Thank you, Matt, for curating this wonderful conversation. Thanks to all of our incredible guests. I think I fell in love with all of you at different times and everything you had to say, and thanks to you all who are watching, for making this another incredible Literary Conversation. We really could not do anything we do without you participating. I wanted to close tonight by dropping our donation link back into the chat window.

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

PEN/Faulkner has continued to stay very strong and very hopeful throughout this pandemic. Part of what has given us that hope is the support that you all have given us. Your books have the ability to help us all bear up under difficult circumstances and keep our lives rich and keep our lives full. Books can be many things for lots of us, but I hope you forgive the pun here, books have been our refuge in a lot of ways. Which is why we work really hard to put books into the hands of DC students who don't always have enough access to stories even in good times and for whom recent events have been particularly difficult.

We want to give them the same refuge and even $15 from you can totally transform one young person's reading life. $15 a month, if you can manage that, it helps us do the same thing over and over again throughout the year. Thank you for being here. Thank you for anything that you can do for PEN/Faulkner so that we can do good things for others and we hope you take care. We hope you enjoyed tonight's literary conversation. Have a good night.