

## The 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award Celebration

May 10, 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](#).

**Jessica Hansen (narration):** Welcome to the 41st PEN/Faulkner Award Celebration, featuring this year's award judges, finalists, and winner, along with special guests – Former First Lady of the United States, Laura Bush, PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion, LeVar Burton, Jason Reynolds, Stephen King, Luis Alberto Urrea, Angie Thomas, Francine Prose, and tonight's Master of Ceremonies, Ron Charles. And now, to kick off the evening, let's welcome PEN/Faulkner Board President, Susan Keselenko Coll.

**Susan Coll:** Good evening! On behalf of our Board and our amazing staff, I'm honored to welcome you to the 41st annual PEN/Faulkner Award Celebration. I'm speaking to you live from Washington, DC, and many of you are tuning in from all over the country and all over the world. While we are not able to meet in person, we've been able to welcome so many new people into our circle virtually and this is one of the many things to celebrate tonight.

This has been a stand-out year in literature and tonight we are joined by remarkable guests, including our inaugural PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion, LeVar Burton, recently dubbed the "nerd-culture prince" by the *New York Times*. And, of course, our five PEN/Faulkner Award finalists and the judges who took on the herculean task of reading the hundreds of books that were submitted.

This has been a challenging year, a year of enormous hardship for many, and of profound change globally, and for each of us personally. Here at PEN/Faulkner, this year has driven home the importance of our mission. Literature matters. Civil discourse is arguably more critical than ever in this time of fractured and frequently-reductive debate. We are proud of the work that we've been able to continue, bringing authors together to discuss some of the most important issues of our day. And we bring these values to our education programs, which are central to our mission, and which have continued to thrive even as we've had to shift to a virtual format during the pandemic.

Tonight's ceremony is our biggest fundraiser of the year and we need your help to reach our goal. Many of you have already contributed generously and we are grateful to all of you, and especially to our lead sponsor this evening, the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation. If you haven't had a chance to contribute, we hope you'll be inspired by what you learn about PEN/Faulkner's mission and that you'll consider making a donation. No amount is too small to help ensure the

future of our programming. You can text to donate using the number on your screen, and you can also use the form below.

**[You can donate to PEN/Faulkner at: [bit.ly/penfaulkner](https://bit.ly/penfaulkner) or by texting “PENFAULKNER” to 44321]**

Now, I have the great pleasure to introduce our emcee, Ron Charles. He's also the author of the weekly *Washington Post* Book Club email and creator of the hilarious genre-defying Totally Hip Video Book Review. Ron has been a good friend of PEN/Faulkner for many years and we're happy to welcome him back tonight. Thank you so much, and over to you, Ron.

**Ron Charles:** Thank you, Susan. It's such an honor to be with you all to celebrate these fantastic writers tonight. We've got a great evening planned. It's the most elaborate, most star-studded PEN/Faulkner Fiction Award Ceremony ever. After fourteen months of lockdown, I've spent the last day watching YouTube videos about how to tie a necktie. I would also like to thank my wife for giving me a haircut, and don't be alarmed if I'm leaning forward a bit, I just want to keep blood off the back of the chair.

It was Emily Dickinson who knew a thing or two about isolation herself, who once wrote, “there is no frigate like a book to take us lands away.” That has never been more true than during the last frigate year. I just wanted to make sure you knew this was indeed live. Great fiction writers like the ones you'll hear from tonight have never been more necessary. Of course they entertain us and move us, but even more important, they draw us into sympathetic understanding of the lives of other people in a world so dangerously divided and siloed, that may be our last best chance for preserving democracy.

For more than 40 years, PEN/Faulkner has supported that crucial work by honoring great writers and offering readings and public conversations about literature throughout the year. And since 1989, the PEN/Faulkner Writers in Schools program has sent authors into DC classrooms to visit students, distribute books, and provide instruction and inspiration to the next generation of storytellers, all free to the schools and their students. So, I hope you'll take a moment during tonight's ceremony to make a donation to help continue that vital work. And now, the PEN/Faulkner team has put together a short video that highlights what makes this organization so special.

**[You can donate to PEN/Faulkner at: [bit.ly/penfaulkner](https://bit.ly/penfaulkner) or by texting “PENFAULKNER” to 44321]**

**Jessica:** The work of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation began in 1980 with the establishment of the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, a new national prize for literary excellence, given by writers to writers.

**Susan Shreve:** The PEN/Faulkner Award is unique because of the way it treats writers so that all writers are treated equally, no matter how famous they might be, no matter how unknown they might be.

**Jessica:** For more than 40 years, PEN/Faulkner's reach has grown. Our mission today is to celebrate literature and foster connections between readers and writers to enrich the literary lives of individuals and communities.

**Dolen Perkins-Valdez:** At PEN/Faulkner, we believe that reading diverse books from a variety of perspectives can make us better people. It's that simple. Empathy, compassion, understanding. We can get that from literature.

**Jessica:** We believe that every child should have access to literary learning opportunities. PEN/Faulkner's education programs combine visits from authors, writing instruction, and donations of culturally relevant books to empower the next generation of readers and writers. We also work hard to ensure that young people see their own lives reflected in the books they read. As a key part of that commitment, our Nuestras Voces initiative engages students with bilingual books and brings Latinx and Hispanic-identified writers into classrooms.

PEN/Faulkner's public literary programs bring great writers together to share their work and inspire stimulating and provocative conversations about contemporary issues. Our public events have featured authors in dialogue about subjects ranging from immigration and pandemics to prison reform and adapting novels to TV and film.

**Souvankham Thammavongsa:** 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.

**Jessica:** Finally, honoring great literary achievement has remained at the heart of our mission. We are proud to give out the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. It's also our great privilege to recognize devoted literary advocacy and a commitment to inspiring new generations of readers and writers by selecting a PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. And, of course, we are honored to celebrate great literature by giving the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction to some of the most significant writers of the last four decades.

**Ron:** Last year, to celebrate its 40th anniversary, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation created a new honor called the PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. This commendation presented here tonight for the first time recognizes a life devoted to literary advocacy and commitment to inspiring new generations of readers and writers. Introducing tonight's winner is a former librarian and the Founder of the National Book Festival, First Lady Laura Bush.

**Laura Bush:** I'm thrilled to join you for the annual PEN/Faulkner Award Ceremony as you celebrate a literary champion, LeVar Burton. You may know LeVar as an actor, but I know him for his decades-long commitment to helping children learn to read. As the beloved host of

*Reading Rainbow* and the Chair of the National Children's Literacy Campaign, LeVar has encouraged millions of children to fall in love with reading. President Bush joins me in saying thank you, LeVar, and congratulations on this well-deserved honor.

**LeVar Burton:** Thank you so much, Mrs. Bush. You yourself have demonstrated that you are indeed a literary champion yourself, and I really appreciate you gracing us with that wonderful introduction.

It is no secret that I am an avid reader and an advocate for literacy and the written word. It all stems from my mother, and whenever I have an opportunity to speak my mother's name in public, I do. Her name was Erma Jean Christian and I'm the man that I am because she was the woman that she was. Before I was born, my mother was a full-time high school English teacher and so, reading in Erma Jean's house was not optional. In fact, I like to say that if you didn't read a book in my mother's house you got hit in the head with one. She used to hate that because it was clearly overstating the situation, but not by a whole lot. So, the idea that reading has a tremendously positive impact on one's life, I learned firsthand. My mother not only read to my siblings and I when we were children, she read in front of us the entirety of her life. My mother generally had two, sometimes three, books going for her own personal pleasure.

She also stressed education as the leveler of the playing field for us, because in the American society in which I grew up in, it was very difficult for people of color to rise to their highest form of expression without the value, without the foundation, of a solid education. For the whole of my life, from Baldwin to Octavia Butler, from Edna St. Vincent Millay to Edgar Allen Poe, I am certain that my life has been immeasurably enhanced by the books that I have read.

My desire to share that passion for reading with a new generation of readers and digital natives has been genuine and has caused me to enjoy attention that I never actually intended. However, as I like to say, of all of the things that I have managed to accomplish in my career, from *Roots* to *Star Trek* and in between, my most treasured and my favorite accomplishment of which I am most proud is being the host and executive producer of *Reading Rainbow*.

I want to thank the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for this high honor. I will be forever grateful for being the inaugural Literary Champion award. I will share with you, in classic *Reading Rainbow* style, what it looks like, and I will frame this and treasure it for the remainder of my life. [He holds up his award.]

I wish everyone a great, good evening, peace and blessings to you all. La Forge, out.

**Ron:** Congratulations to LeVar Burton for being the first recipient of the PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion award. As I'm sure everybody knows, he is also being considered as the new permanent host of *Jeopardy!* It's important, of course, that we all remain completely unbiased as that decision is being made, but I would ask that everyone tonight please state your answers in

the form of a question. I'll get us started. Why does PEN/Faulkner matter? For \$400. Here are some of America's most beloved writers to tell you.

**Angie Thomas:** Hi, I'm Angie Thomas.

**Luis Alberto Urrea:** Hi, I'm Luis Alberto Urrea.

**Francine Prose:** Hi, I'm Francine Prose.

**Jason Reynolds:** What's happening, everybody? This is Jason Reynolds.

**Stephen King:** Hi, I'm Stephen King, and I'm here to remind you of something you probably know already.

**Angie:** PEN/Faulkner matters because books matter.

**Luis:** Because words matter.

**Francine:** PEN/Faulkner matters because books matter and writers matter and readers matter and kids reading in school matters and recognizing literature matters and keeping it alive matters.

**Luis:** Education matters, hope matters, literacy matters.

**Jason:** PEN/Faulkner matters simply because PEN/Faulkner knows that young people matter.

**Angie:** Books have the ability to change the world, to change perspective, to change minds, to change lives.

**Stephen:** Reading and writing are more important than ever. The more we amplify our storytellers of every color and orientation, the better off we'll all be.

**Francine:** I feel loyal to an institution that cares about the things I care about.

**Jason:** The work that they do with the Writers in Schools program is so important and so necessary, and it's going to leave a legacy behind as all these young folks grow up to further sort of impart the fact that PEN/Faulkner is important, and a necessary force in this world.

**Angie:** I'm appreciative of the event I got to do with them several years ago. I still remember it. And I'm appreciative of the passion that they have for literature, and then, in turn, literacy.

**Luis:** From schoolhouses to stages, to awards ceremonies, to mentoring, PEN/Faulkner keeps what's good in the world alive.

**Angie:** So PEN/Faulkner, thank you for existing. Thank you for recognizing that books matter.

**Stephen:** That's why I'm asking you to support the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. I do.

**[You can donate to PEN/Faulkner at: [bit.ly/penfaulkner](https://bit.ly/penfaulkner) or by texting "PENFAULKNER" to 44321]**

**Ron:** It's now my pleasure to introduce a friend of mine who is a very fine novelist himself and a former *Jeopardy!* contestant. That's true. Please don't mention Scottish castles around him. He's the Chair of the PEN/Faulkner Awards Committee, Lou Bayard.

**Louis Bayard:** Thank you, Ron.

Our judges this year, Charles Finch, Bernice L. McFadden, and Alexi Zentner, faced some formidable challenges. Not only did they have to sift through 419 eligible novels and short story collections from 170 publishing houses, but they had to do it in the midst of the COVID pandemic, which is to say, virtually and electronically and, in the end, hopefully. Undaunted, they settled on five gifted authors whose work reminds us at a time when we most need reminding that fiction still has the power both to heal and to make us question.

Tonight, those finalists will be introduced by our judges and will then read brief selections from their nominated works before answering the question we posed for them – why is the story you've told of unique significance in the present moment? We hope you'll enjoy their answers. We hope you'll savor their company. And we hope that when the evening is done, your faith in the written word will be more powerful than ever. Thank you for all you do to support PEN/Faulkner and its founding mission.

**Jessica:** Please welcome 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Bernice L. McFadden.

**Bernice L. McFadden:** "Invisible to whom?" Once asked the late great Toni Morrison and now, years later, Matthew Salesses offers a wry and witty retort in his tightly crafted, imaginative, multilayered novel, *Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear*.

More than a century after W.E.B. Dubois first wrote about double consciousness, Matt Kim, a Korean man raised by White adoptive parents in a country where the othering of non-White people is customary, is suddenly very keenly aware of his own double consciousness, his own two-ness. The wondrous and unique story that follows his revelation is both deadly serious and uproariously funny. Written with the keen observations of a veteran humorist, Salesses adeptly interrogates the promise that is America and what it means to be a model minority American in the dawn of a White supremacist renaissance. When asked about the impetus for his *Disappear*

*Doppelgänger Disappear*, Matthew said you have to write about your worst fears. I present to you, Matthew Salesses.

**Matthew Salesses:** Thank you so much, Bernice. I'm in a sentence with Tony Morrison, so amazing, I never thought that would happen. Thank you so much. I'm just going to read a little bit.

**Matthew reading from *Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear*:**

I never expected anything to be over. I only wanted the world to play by its stated rules. If you minded your own business, why should anyone bother you? Where was the freedom I was promised? When I stopped seeing my family, when I left my job, people called me a quitter, a coward, too proud or ungrateful. But the world could destroy itself on its own—why did it need me?

Suddenly one of the dudebros who'd been following me turned and spat at my feet. His friend pulled him into the diner. Three drops of saliva fizzled on the purple velour of my pantsuit. I waited for the spit to dry and thought about my cool air-conditioned home. Why do we leave our homes? To be with other people, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health.

As they passed me people kept to the edge of the sidewalk or stepped down into the street. I was marked contagious. I rubbed the fur of my tracksuit on a lamp pole and followed the dudebros inside, pretending to be fine. Fake it until you make it to heaven.

**Matthew:** I'd like to take my allotted time to talk about anti-Asian racism and violence. The excerpt I just read was actually written long before the pandemic, but Asians have always been seen as a sickness upon the imaginary body of White America.

*Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear* begins with an abbreviated list of disappearances, starting with the 1875 Page Act that banned immigration of Chinese women on the basis that they were "lewd and immoral," quote. And ending with a 1942 executive order, 9066, that sent Japanese Americans, not German or Italian Americans, to concentration camps during World War II.

In the past year, over 6,000 attacks against Asian Americans have been reported and many more have likely gone unreported. Words matter, and the words we use to describe the pandemic have been hateful and targeted. We are here because, as we've been hearing, we believe words matter, that words move people's minds and hearts. How people are moved is up to what words we use and in whose service we use them. The language itself is inscribed with power. The meaning of a word depends on its past impressions, so that the more a person sees or hears a word in a certain context, the more the context comes to be associated with its meaning.

What it means to be Asian in America is to be associated with a certain cultural and historical context that includes anti-immigration acts, misogyny and homophobia, concentration camps, and now the coronavirus. *Disappear Doppelgänger Disappear* takes as its objective the breaking down of perceived meanings in new, or at least, different contexts. I hope to see the country move forward toward a different context, both for the pandemic, and for Asian Americans. And I'm so honored that the PEN/Faulkner Foundation and the judges have seen the potential in my book. Thank you.

**Jessica:** Please welcome 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Charles Finch.

**Charles Finch:** Good evening. As this century has challenged and rewritten our notions of what constitutes a family, an important new literature of friendship has arisen concurrently. Friendship as a primary rather than secondary experience, a vital, variegated, difficult but nourishing element of contemporary life, one that can feel to many in this fissured world as decisive as ties of blood.

In her stunningly conceived and written novel, *The Knockout Queen*, Ruffi Thorpe joins the ranks of writers like Zadie Smith and Elena Ferrante in turning her attention to this subject. The book's main characters, Michael and Bunny, are teenage neighbors in the suburbs of California, whose bland, unending beauty comes to seem like a reproach to their own less serenely assured identities. Bunny has money, even a pool, but she's 6'3" and socially in a state of almost total bewilderment while Michael is living at his aunt's on [unintelligible], broke, alone, and navigating sexual encounters with strangers from the Internet without anything but his own instincts to guide him.

Thorpe's writing is so funny and smart that its deeper emotions often only appear visible after a beat or two of reflection, yet it becomes clear in the course of *The Knockout Queen* that she is interested in friendship like Smith and Ferrante, not simply for its own ends, but as a new kind of lens on class, sex, grief, adolescence, and yes, family. Perhaps even herself, it seems like an act of love to reinhabit the anguish of high school so closely. Ultimately, though, this beautiful and engrossing book is about two human beings finding in each other an interruption to the loneliness of being alive. Few recent American novels have seen more clearly how much our ideas of family have changed and, at the same time, how little our needs. It's my great honor to introduce 2021 PEN/Faulkner finalist Ruffi Thorpe.

**Ruffi Thorpe:** Hi. You may be able to guess from the title that this is a book about people hitting each other. So, I thought I would read a little passage about hitting. The book is narrated by Michael and is predominantly about his friendship with Bunny, but this is a description of their friend Ann Marie, who is someone Bunny winds up hitting.

**Ruffi reading from *The Knockout Queen*:**



Ann Marie was a special kind of being, small, cute, mean, glossy, what might in more literary terms be called a “nymphet,” but only by a heterosexual male author, for no one who did not want to fuck Ann Marie would be charmed by her. She was extra, ultra, cringe-inducingly saccharine, a creature white-hot with lack of irony. She was not pretty, but somehow had no inkling of this fact, and she performed prettiness so well that boys felt sure she was. She had brassy golden hair and freckles and blue eyes slightly too wide set and bulging. Even though she was short, she played varsity volleyball with Bunny.

Bunny and Ann Marie had known each other since they were two years old because Bunny had attended the Catholic preschool that Ann Marie’s mother ran. Ann Marie’s mother, otherwise known to the children as Ms. Harriet, was the principal, and so as a two-, three-, four-year-old, Bunny was disciplined by Ann Marie’s mother, and Bunny’s memories of her were vivid. What was most interesting and most frightening about Ms. Harriet is that she never said what you were expecting her to, and she was completely unmoved and unfrazzled by tears, fits, tantrums, and violence. She was calm not in a way that was kind, or soft, or in any way jiggly, Bunny said. Hers was a calm made of stone. Ann Marie’s mother loved no one and hated no one and was surprised by no one. She and Ann Marie’s father had divorced and divorced early. Ms. Harriet was well done with bullshit even by the time both girls turned two. Bunny could still remember one comment Ms. Harriet had made, quite calmly, to a boy named Liam, who was prone to hitting. “Do you like to be hit?”

“No,” Liam had said.

“Do you love people who hit you?”

“No,” he had said. How old was he? Three? Maybe not even that.

“So who is going to love you if you keep on hitting? Who is going to love someone like that?”

“No one,” the boy said, tears sliding down his cheeks as he studied the tile floor at his feet.

“That’s right,” Ms. Harriet said. “So you’ve got some thinking to do and some decisions to make. You can hit. Not anybody in this world can really and truly make you stop if hitting is how you want to be. But if you do, you’re risking all that love you could have had. Because nobody, nobody, nobody, is going to stand around all day for you to hit just hoping to love you in return.”

That was the thing about Ms. Harriet, Bunny told me. She was always almost right, but a little bit wrong in a way that was scary.

**Rufi:** So, *The Knockout Queen*, as much as it is about friendship and violence and sexuality, I think it's sort of first and foremost a book about loving someone who's done something very bad, and about the ugliness inside each one of us.

I come from a long line of evil people, people who drank and hit and lied and participated in genocide and who cheated and committed fraud, or tried to, they weren't very good at it. And I was shielded from their violence by my mother and, because of her bravery and grace, what I inherited was not the trauma, but the stories. The stories of these terrible people and the things they did. And I think every book I've ever written, but especially this one, has been an attempt to digest these perhaps indigestible facts.

After the last four years I think we're all attempting to digest certain indigestible facts, struggling with how exactly to contain human evil or explain human evil. It seems clear that extinguishing it may be a naive goal, but what is it even? Why do we do these things to each other?

In the book, Bunny wonders if she's a monster, and she's quick to explain away that she's murdered someone but lingers long on the fact that she's real tall. Her father, Ray Lambert, is by no means a portrait of Donald Trump but they are creatures of the same genus, morally double jointed and uniquely able to believe their own lies. Michael, the narrator, the only character, really, who does not do anything bad but who crosses a social line by having an affair with an older man, is brutally punished for it.

It's a book that starts with wondering what to do with the evil in people and whether punishment is an adequate or rational response, and ends up questioning whether good and evil are simply things we made up. Pretty ideas that we are quick to set down when it's expedient. But Michael is never entirely able to give up on the idea of being good. He wants too badly to be good. He just can't figure out what to do with the ugliness that he's seen. And I don't really know either. I guess you just keep looking even when you want to close your eyes, and that is really all I try to do as a writer, not really find the answers so much as pose the questions as deeply as I can. To admit the way that we are even when I would rather not.

I am so grateful and honored to be here tonight with these incredible writers. Thank you all for being so brave and for looking at the world as it is and letting me find it made new and strange in your pages. And thank you to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for creating this space where books matter, and for honoring writers and championing free speech. It fills me with hope. You all fill me with so much hope. Thank you.

**Jessica:** Please welcome 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Alexi Zentner.

**Alexi Zentner:** There are novels you want to sip slowly and there are novels you want to drink down in one big frenzied gulp. Very occasionally, there are novels that allow for both. Robin Wasserman's *Mother Daughter Widow Wife* is a meditation on time, memory, love, and loss. It is also a book full of intelligence, secrets, mysteries and bright bursts of humor.

When we first meet one of the main characters, we are told, for all of the obvious reasons, Lizzie preferred rats. Rats were adaptable and interchangeable, smart and cheap. Rats proffered no opinions, demanded no small talk. But when Lizzie wins a competitive fellowship at

the Meadowlark Institute for Memory Research, her mentor, the esteemed Dr. Strauss, assigns Lizzie to study Wendy Doe, a woman with no memory and no past. Twenty years later, the past catches up. Lizzie, now Elizabeth, and Strauss' widow, is confronted by the daughter of Wendy Doe, who is searching for her mother – once again, missing.

This is a book where personal history pulls with the gravity of a black hole, but Wasserman's writing is enough to let the light break free. The characters in *Mother Daughter Widow Wife* all struggle with the uncertainty of memory, but they are also all trying to understand the same questions. How are identities destroyed and how are identities reclaimed?

It is my pleasure to introduce the 2021 PEN/Faulkner finalist and author of *Mother Daughter Widow Wife*, Robin Wasserman.

**Robin Wasserman:** Thank you so much, Alexi. I've been struggling to figure out how to describe this book for five years now and I see that what I was missing was you. So when book tours are a thing again, I'll just bring you along with me, if you don't mind.

I'm just going to read from the middle of the book.

**Robin reading from *Mother Daughter Widow Wife*:**

It's 1999, the year of the end of the world, and she tells him she can't do this anymore. She won't do this again. By the end of the conversation, she is doing it again. He swears she is the only one, and this seems to matter, though Lizzie is unsure if or why it should. She does not accept that her actions should be defined by his heart—that if he loves her, she is a tragic, romantic heroine, that if he simply lusts, if she is a link in a chain of lust, then sex is just sex, her body just a body. She does not accept that she should be categorized like a Shakespearean play, end defining the means—as if adultery resulting in marriage is inherently nobler than adultery that simply expires. She does not accept that she is a type, a tool, a hole—if he deems it so. She is neither helpless in the face of love nor ruthless in her weaponization of lust. She is this kind of woman: the kind who wants. If it is just sex, just desire, just one body in need of another, then let it be just.

Sometimes, though, she's less convinced. Sometimes she thinks he is every husband who's ever fucked a woman who's not his wife; she is every woman who's ever said I don't care if he leaves her, and longs for him to leave her. She wants this to be different, but sometimes secretly suspects Meg Ryan is right, Tolstoy is right, nothing is ever different. She dreams of the day he discovers he cannot live without her, even if it means enacting a Russian tragedy. When the pull of the dream grows too strong, she promises herself she'll stay away. When the pull of his body grows too strong, she boomerangs back. He's a married man. She's the other woman. Note, she thinks, the articles. A married man could be any of them; the other woman is particular, the active agent, the one to blame.

What are we doing, she asks, always, but always after.

He says can we not ask that, not now?

He says “we,” as if they are one person, and that one person is him.

**Robin:** I want to thank the PEN/Faulkner Foundation in general and also this year's judges in particular, both for their tireless efforts on behalf of literature and for the honor of being named a finalist alongside all these extraordinary writers. This is the kind of unexpected joy in a very dark year that can make a person burst into tears on a crowded street corner, which, admittedly, is not the first time I've done that this year but it is by far the happiest.

When I was asked to talk about why my book is of significance to the present moment, I will admit that, given the present moment, I was knocked a little off-balance, because, in so many ways, it feels like this book was written in a world that no longer exists and then published into a world that I'm still struggling to wrap my head around.

But it's also a story that was conceived in rage. It was drafted in resistance in response to a world that sometimes seems like it can never change enough. It's a story about men who think they own women's bodies and about a society that thinks they should decide what roles women are allowed to play. It's a story about the stories we tell for women – daughter, wife, mother – stories shaped around someone else, stories of obligation, and stories too often of a body claimed by another.

This book started, you could say, as my furious escapist fantasy. Its characters all abruptly untethered from the roles that define their lives. A daughter without a mother, a wife without a husband, a woman without a past, free to rewrite her story. And mid-way through revising the book, as sometimes happens, I found myself living it. I moved 3,000 miles away from everyone I knew. And I discovered what I really should have learned from all those years of writing – the freedom of the blank page is not all it's cracked up to be. To be wholly untethered, to be free of all obligation, is also to be alone and adrift, which brings me back to the present moment.

This is the year we all became untethered. The year our domestic roles took over our lives. Motherhood became all consuming, partners inescapable, isolation, for those of us supposedly free from all of that, became total. This was the year daughters moved home to take care of aging parents because no one else would. Wives locked down with abusive husbands because they had nowhere else to go. Nearly 3 million women have dropped out of the workforce, many of them mothers who lost the freedom to be anything but.

You could say, for me, the main thread connecting the before times to our present moment is that I'm still angry, and I'm still furiously dreaming of escape. But I'm still hopeful. This is why I write, this is the only way I can write. I'm hopeful because we are here together and because it's starting to seem possible that, soon, together will actually mean what it's supposed to mean

again, and I'm hopeful because obligation can be oppressive, but – and I say this as someone who spent the last year alone in my house obligated to absolutely no one – obligation is also a joy, just like freedom from expectation, and from the person you've always expected yourself to be, is terrifying but also exhilarating.

This is a book that tries to live in that collision between terror and joy, between loss and liberation. It tries to ask in rage and uncertainty and hope – if we were nobody's mother, nobody's daughter, nobody's wife, who might we become? Thank you, all of you.

**Jessica:** Please welcome 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Charles Finch.

**Charles:** In the last five years, it has seemed at times as if we are a nation of two permanently estranged tribes, doing little more than sending up angry flares at each other. But in *Scattered Lights*, a quiet, probing, masterful collection of stories set in his native Ozarks, Steve Wiegenstein tacitly rejects that binary and, in doing so, returns to a fundamental promise of fiction, that politics dissolves in the particular.

Wiegenstein's [unintelligible] strength as a writer is in his characters – a girl reflecting with awe at herself on a kiss, a widow who refuses to take her predetermined place in a town's society, a middle-aged man whose dispiriting new job suddenly and unexpectedly decides him in favor of courage and happiness. In all of these instances, the characters' inner lives precede whatever lesson they may represent. Wiegenstein steadfastly and honorably refuses to invite catastrophe or revelation on his characters for the sake of a reader's cheap excitement.

Instead, he presents us with dozens of distinctive and real people doing their best, or not so best, but intermittently asking the same questions all of us do – why are we here, who loves us, what do we owe each other, what does it mean to be good? In the process, the pared, beautiful prose of *Scattered Lights* comes to seem less a style than an ethic – not to intrude, but to observe; not to judge, but to comprehend. The project founded on a final faith, present in great writers of short fiction, from Chekov to Grace Paley, to another of this year's finalists Deesha Philyaw, that art is where our higher selves can meet, free from the transient furies of the news. The sooner we begin paying attention to each other as people, Wiegenstein argues, the more people we suddenly begin to see, no matter where we're from.

It's my great honor to introduce 2021 PEN/Faulkner finalist, Steve Wiegenstein.

**Steve Wiegenstein:** Thank you so much, Charles. The passage I want to read is from a story in the collection titled "Trio Sonata in C." This is a selection from the story in my collection called "Trio Sonata in C."

**Steve reading from *Scattered Lights*:**

April, six in the morning, and Tom hears Grandpa doing his morning check of the downstairs doors and windows. One by one they rattle—kitchen, dining room, nook, living room, hallway, back storage, utility room. He looks over. Elizabeth is still asleep. So is his left arm, pinned underneath her, and he remembers that they had made love sometime after midnight, when he got in from Atlanta, and had fallen asleep still entangled. He eases the arm out and sits up, feeling a blot of pain roll down his artery like a ball bearing. She doesn't stir. Tom slides out of bed, pads downstairs avoiding the third step from the top, which squeaks.

Grandpa is at the kitchen table now, his .22 pistol beside his plate. He has emptied a jar of maraschino cherries into a white cereal bowl and scoops them out one at a time: slurps the sugar water from his spoon, contemplates the glowing half-cherry for a moment, then picks it off with the tip of his tongue. He has switched to his summer outfit of overalls and flannel shirt. He does not look up.

"Morning, Thomas," Grandpa says. "You're up early today."

"You want an egg?" Tom says.

"If I had wanted an egg, I would have gotten an egg." The last cherry disappears into his snapping toothless jaws.

"Wish you wouldn't carry that gun in the house."

"No point in checking for robbers if you don't have a gun."

**Steve:** And that was the story called "Trio Sonata in C" from *Scattered Lights*. Thanks so much to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for honoring this book with a finalist status, and thanks to everyone who is watching this evening, wherever you may be. It's a great honor and it really means a lot.

When I think about the significance of my story in the present moment, I think of a few things. One is that these stories are about, for the most part, people in small towns, rural people. And that's a segment of the population that merits careful attention. But when I look at these stories, I don't just see Ozarkers or country people. I see people who are up against it, who are often in circumstances that they cannot control, and they're doing the best they can within the boundaries of life that surround them.

Tom, for example, in "Trio Sonata," he's trying to hold his family together while his father-in-law, who lives with them, is slowly losing his faculties. In the story that's called "Unexplained Aerial Phenomena," Jeanine is an itinerant academic who finds herself in the Ozarks pretty much by accident, more or less. She's almost immediately in over her head emotionally, professionally, and pretty much in every other way. In the story "Magic Kids," young Will is dying and he would like to talk about that but his family just wants to distract him and themselves.

So, I do appreciate what Charles said about characters because I do focus on character, and what they tend to have in common is that they're trying to make sense of a world that does not make much sense right now, or in their lives for that matter. And let's face it, if you haven't shared that feeling in the last few years, you're a very lucky person. These characters are more universal than their region. They're called out of themselves in the moments of decision or action. They're forced to deal with who they are and what they really want out of life. So, as you read these stories, I would hope that you feel an element of recognition or empathy with these characters. And if you do, then my work has been a success.

And finally, I would say that this work is significant for the present moment in that it comes from a very small press in West Plains, Missouri, Cornerpost, run by Phil and Victoria Howerton, co-owners. And it's a great recognition of the PEN/Faulkner ethic of not just recognizing authors from large publishing houses but from small presses in out-of-the-way locations. Without Phil and Victoria's work, the book would not have been nearly what it is. So, that's a great honor and something to be appreciated as well. Thanks to everyone, and I'll throw it back to you.

**Jessica:** Please welcome 2021 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Bernice L. McFadden.

**Bernice:** The title brings to mind worn leather-bound bibles, organ music, and stately white-gloved elder Black women crowned in extravagant hats. But who you actually meet in the nine exquisite stories that comprise Deesha Philyaw's debut, *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*, are complex women of all ages, backgrounds and sexual orientations who grapple with love, lust, and the mysteries and miseries of life.

In an interview with the Brooklyn Public Library, Deesha said nostalgia was central in her choice to identify her characters as church ladies, because those were the women who nurtured and raised her. Quote: "the women of my youth loomed large. Women inside and outside the church, all of them influenced and shaped in some way by the church's teachings and restrictive binaries." In the group portrait that emerges, Philyaw gives us that rarest and most joyful fusion, a book that combines the curious agility of the best short fiction with the deep, emotional coherence of a great novel.

I present to you the winner of the 2021 PEN/Faulkner [Award for Fiction], Deesha Philyaw.

**Deesha Philyaw:** Thank you so much, Bernice. I'm going to read the first two pages of a story in the collection called "Peach Cobbler." And I'm wearing my peach earrings tonight.

**Deesha reading from *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies*:**

My mother's peach cobbler was so good, it made God himself cheat on his wife. When I was five, I hovered around my mother in the kitchen, watching, close enough to have memorized all the ingredients and steps by the time I was six. But not too close to make her yell at me for

being in the way. And not close enough to see the exact measurements she used. She never wrote the recipe down. Without having to be told, I learned not to ask questions about that cobbler, or about God. I learned not to say anything at all about him hunching over our kitchen table every Monday eating plate after plate of peach cobbler, and then disappearing into the bedroom I shared with my mother.

I became a silent student of my mother and her cobbler-making ways. Even when I was older and no longer believed that God and Reverend Troy Neely were one and the same, I still longed to perfect the sweetness and textures of my mother's cobbler. My mother, who fed me TV dinners, baked a peach cobbler with fresh peaches every Monday, her day off from the diner where she waited tables. She always said Sunday was her Saturday and Monday was her Sunday. What I knew was that none of her days were for me.

And for many of those Mondays off and on during my childhood, God (to my child's mind) would stop by and eat an entire 8 x 8 pan of cobbler. My mother never ate any of the cobbler herself; she said she didn't like peaches. She would shoo me out of the kitchen before God could offer me any, but I doubted he would have offered even if I'd sat right down next to him. God was an old fat man, like a Black Santa, and I imagined my mother's peach cobbler contributing to his girth.

Some Mondays, God would arrive after dinner and leave as I lay curled up on the couch watching *Little House on the Prairie* in the living room. Other times my mother and God would already be in the bedroom when I got home from school. I could hear moaning and pounding, like a board hitting a wall, as soon as I entered the house. I would shut the front door quietly behind me and tiptoe down the hall to listen outside the bedroom door. "Oh, God! Oh, God! Oh, God!" my mother would cry. I could hear God too, his voice low and growly, saying, "Yes, yes, yes!"

**Deesha:** Thank you again, Bernice. Thank you Alexi, Charles, Gwydion, Shahenda, and everyone at the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and congratulations to all my fellow honorees tonight. I am thrilled to be in your fine company, and I am thrilled to accept this year's PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. [She holds up the award.]

The stories in my collection are of unique significance in the present moment because Ntozake Shange wrote, "somebody/ anybody/sing a black girl's song/bring her out/to know herself." Because Zora Neale Hurston said, "There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you." Because, as Bernice mentioned earlier, Tony Morrison asked Ralph Ellison, "invisible to whom?"

My stories are meaningful in this present moment because I've always looked to Black women to see what's possible. And when I looked to J. California Cooper, Toni Cade Bambara, Nikki Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Fran Ross, Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Bernice McFadden, Tina McElroy Ansa, Terry McMillan, Crystal Wilkinson, and so many others, when I looked to them, they showed me that these stories were possible and also necessary for our healing, our freedom, and our joy.



My stories are meaningful in this present moment because of those who are writing with me now, because of Yona Harvey, Tamara Winfrey Harris, Issa Mas, Vanessa German, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Faith Adiele, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Basseyy Ikpi, Desiree Coleman, I'm sorry, Desiree – sorry, got my names wrong – Renee Simms, Dantiel Moniz, Khalisa Rae, Patrice Grell Yursik, Lonnae O'Neal, A.K. Payne, Tyra Jamison, Alma LaVon Rice, Delana Flowers, Heather Manning, Samantha Irby, Destiny O. Birdsong, Shayla Lawson, Tyrese Coleman, Toya Smith, Melanie Dione, Candice Benbow, Tracey M. Lewis-Giggetts, Dawnie Walton, Regina N. Bradley, Nadia Owusu, Kylie Reid, Kelli Stevens Kane, Monet Thomas, Tereneh Idia, Cheryl Hall-Russell, Alana Williams, Aaliyah Thomas, Celeste Smith, Yvonne McBride, Kaitlyn Greenidge, Roxane Gay, Monica Prince, Reverend Leeann Younger, Josie Pickens, Lọlá Ákínmádé Åkerström, Hannah Eko, and so many cherished others.

I wrote *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* for us. May we always be free. Thank you.

**Ron:** Congratulations, and thanks so much to these amazing fiction writers and the PEN/Faulkner judges. Those tireless conscientious readers who said yes in a moment of extravagant generosity – 419 books, they have done an immense service, thank you.

And thanks to all of you for watching tonight's ceremony. As much as I miss us all being together in person, it's been wonderful to share this evening with book lovers all over the world. I hope you're tempted to run out and read all these incredible books that we've heard about tonight. But first, the last word goes to the Executive Director of PEN/Faulkner, Gwydion Suilebhan.

**Gwydion Suilebhan:** Thank you, Ron, for doing such a spectacular job, as always, serving as our emcee for tonight's event. We're lucky to have you.

And thanks to all of you for joining us tonight, just as so many of you have stayed behind us during this difficult period. We could not serve the literary community, which includes all of you, without your support. And I hope that before we conclude tonight, you will consider a donation, if you haven't already made one, to support our education and our literary programs, to share the richness and joy you experienced here with those who don't always have access to that. You can text to donate or you can use the form right below this video.

**[You can donate to PEN/Faulkner at: [bit.ly/penfaulkner](https://bit.ly/penfaulkner) or by texting “PENFAULKNER” to 44321]**

And I also hope that, after we sign off, you'll stay connected to PEN/Faulkner. If you want to learn more about our programs, you're already on our website. While I'm giving thanks, I also want to acknowledge the amazingly talented Jessica Hansen who provided the voiceover narration for tonight's production, and the two members of the PEN/Faulkner staff without whom tonight would not have been possible, Shahenda Helmy and Amanda Liaw.

Thank you as well to all of our special guests, including Former First Lady Laura Bush, Stephen King, Angie Thomas, Jason Reynolds, Francine Prose, and Luis Alberto Urrea. I also want to acknowledge, very importantly, our bookstore partners. Local independent bookstores are an essential component of the literary ecosystem, not only here in the DC region, but everywhere. We celebrate you for helping to keep people connected to culture, not only during this difficult period, but all the time.

Finally, I want to share our deepest gratitude for tonight's lead sponsor, the Diana Davis Spencer Foundation, a true luminary in support of PEN/Faulkner, and also to give my sincere thanks to all of our sponsors and friends, whose names you will see on screen in just a moment. You are the heart and soul of PEN/Faulkner. You have made such a tremendous difference in this challenging year for us all. And I thank you.

So good night, everyone. And we hope to see you again soon.