2021 PEN/Malamud Award Ceremony

December 3, 2021

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

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Deborah Tannen: Good evening. Thank you for joining us as we confer the 33rd Annual PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. I'm Deborah Tannen. I'm a member of the PEN/Faulkner Board and Chair of the committee that administers the PEN/Malamud Award. On behalf of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, we are thrilled to welcome you to tonight's celebration of this year's PEN/Malamud Award Winner, Charles Baxter, and his amazing work.

For those of you who aren't familiar with us, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a nonprofit literary organization based in Washington, DC, with the mission of celebrating literature and fostering connections between readers and writers. The Foundation administers two national literary awards — the one that brings us here tonight and also the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. In addition, our Writers in Schools program brings free books, and here is the exciting part, the authors who wrote them to DC public and public charter schools. Our Literary Conversations series brings contemporary authors together for readings and discussions.

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

Tonight, for the second time, the award ceremony is virtual. We miss seeing you in person but we're glad that more of you can attend from distant places, including a number of past winners, and for that we're grateful. We are also thrilled to be partnering with American University's MFA program. In that regard, I'll pass the virtual lectern now to Stephanie who will tell you a bit more about that.

Stephanie Grant: Thank you so much, Deborah. I'm Stephanie Grant. I direct the MFA program here in Washington, DC, and there's a Charles Baxter story, very well-loved, that I've been teaching for, I'm not sure, maybe 15 years, *Saul and Patsy are in Labor*. At the end of the wonderful story which is about, among other things, the labor of marriage, the labor of making family, the Patsy of the story's title makes a somewhat cryptic remark, "We're the missionaries they left behind when they took all the religion away."

I always ask my students what on earth this remark means. To what is Patsy referring to? What is Charles Baxter referring? I've come to believe this line is about writers. That he's telling us that writers are the missionaries who were left behind when they took all the religion away. What do missionaries do? Well, they proselytize and we here at American University's MFA program in Creative Writing, we indeed are great proselytizers. We proselytize the power of language and self-expression, lyricism, and narrative and reportage. Which is to say we proselytize the power of

fiction and poetry and creative nonfiction in all their many guises, and have been doing so for 40 years here in our very own Tower of Babel, the great Washington, DC.

We proselytize the importance of building strong writing communities, which is why we're so happy to be sharing the stage tonight with the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, one of DC's most essential and vibrant literary organizations. We proselytize the extraordinary beauty and necessity of the short story, a literary form sometimes neglected by the marketplace but celebrated by writers and readers who recognize the power of compression and the ecstatic quality of epiphanies realized, or, as in Baxter's own stories and essays on form, epiphanies deferred, refused, or misperceived by their own subjects.

All semester, our students and faculty have had the great privilege of reading and discussing the work of this year's recipient of the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story. In so doing, we have all become acolytes of Charles Baxter. We want to thank the Malamud family and the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for collaborating with us this evening, and we welcome you all to American University, to our Visiting Writers Series, and to this magnificent celebration of the short story. Thank you.

Deborah: Now I have the privilege of introducing Lisa Page who will introduce Charles Baxter. Lisa is Director of Creative Writing and Assistant Professor of English at the George Washington University. Previously, she served as Interim Director of Africana Studies, and she's also a faculty member of the Yale Writers Workshop. She is also a longtime member of the PEN/Faulkner board, former president of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and has co-chaired the PEN/Malamud committee.

Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Washington Post Book World*, *Lit Hub Weekly*, *the Crisis*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *American Short Fiction*, *Playboy*, and many other publications. Lisa is also co-editor of *We Wear the Mask: 15 True Stories of Passing in America*, which includes a wonderful essay of her own. Over to you, Lisa.

Lisa Page: Thank you so much for that, Deborah. I really appreciate such kind words. It has been such a pleasure to work with you, the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and especially, the PEN/Malamud committee. Dedication to the short story as an art form is what this evening is about. I'd also like to recognize my fellow judges for this award, Marie Arana and Lou Bayard. Working with you both, I learned so much, and a special shout out to Shahenda Helmy for putting together tonight's events.

Tonight the order of events is as follows. Charles Baxter will do a brief reading, followed by our conversation and Q&A with the audience. Please put your questions in the Q&A. Then we will present the award. And now it's my pleasure to introduce tonight's winner.

Bernard Malamud once said, "You can't eat language but it eases thirst." Language isn't food but words can work like water. They can revive us, renew us, quench our thirst for fresh perspective and for surprise. The short stories of Charles Baxter work like water. Familiar places show up in these stories, places that feed us; the corner coffee shop, the riverbank, the light rail, the great lake, landscapes where the light gets in even as the darkness looms. Baxter country is full of

natural beauty and characters who make mistakes but also make connections. Stories that serve up lessons on love and forgiveness, loss, devastation, revenge, and renewal.

Charles Baxter is the author of the novels, *The Feast of Love*, nominated for the National Book Award, *First Light*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Soul Thief*, and *The Sun Collective*, and the story collections *Believers*, *Gryphon*, *Harmony of the World*, *A Relative Stranger*, *There's Something I Want You to Do*, and *Through the Safety Net*. His stories have appeared in several anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Pushcart Prize Anthology*, and *The O. Henry Prize Story Anthology*. He is the winner tonight of the PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story and we celebrate him. Please welcome Charles Baxter.

Charles Baxter: Thank you, Lisa. I'm very honored to have been chosen for the PEN/Malamud Award and to be in the company of former winners. I want to thank the PEN/Faulkner organization and Deborah Tannen, Shahenda Helmy, and all those others who have contributed or administered this award, particularly the members of the Malamud family. As it happens, I was inspired and feel indebted to Bernard Malamud, whose work in the short story was a model of sorts to me. In my story, *Saul and Patsy are in Labor*, you will find, if you look closely enough, my homage to Mr. Malamud's story, *Idiots First*, which I consider to be one of the great American stories.

After thinking about what I would read for this occasion, I decided on a story of mine that I wrote about 33 years ago, a couple of years after I was in the audience when Bernard Malamud himself read at the University of Michigan from his last novel, *The People*. Given the nature and the occasion of this award, the story I've decided to read this evening, don't worry, it's only five and a half pages long, is about storytelling. Its title is *Scheherazade*, in honor of the storyteller in the *One Thousand and One Nights*, who kept death at a distance and saved her own life and the life of her sister, Dunyazad, by telling a new story every evening to the king and leaving the ending unresolved at dawn.

In my story, as you'll see, Scheherazade is an old woman, and the scene has been moved to an assisted care facility where the woman's husband seems to be slipping into dementia. The stories she is telling are life-giving, or so she believes, and they stand opposed not to forgetting exactly, but to silence. You can't hear the silence on the page but in my reading, I'll try to indicate it. The story appeared in my collection, *A Relative Stranger*, published in 1990.

Charles reading “Scheherazade”:

She leaned down to adjust his respirator tube and the elastic tie around his neck that kept it in place. "Don't," he said, an all-purpose warning referring to nothing in particular. She heard Muzak from down the hall, a version, she thought, of "Stardust" that made her think of cold soup.

He was looking sallow and breathing poorly. She would have to lie again to perk him up.

"Do you remember," she said, sitting in the chair next to his chair, "My goodness, this would have been 50, 60 years ago, that trip we made to Hawaii?"

"I don't remember it," he said. "I don't think I've been there."

"Oh, yes, you have," she said, patting his hand where the wedding ring was. "We took the train. It had "Zephyr" in its name somewhere. One of those silver trains that serve steak for dinner in the dining car. We had a romantic night on that train. I suppose you don't remember that."

"No," he said. "Not just now."

"Well," she said, "We did. We took it to Oakland or San Francisco, I forget which, and from there we took the ship to Honolulu."

"What ship?" he said. "I don't remember a ship. Did it have a name?"

She leaned back and stared at the ceiling. Why did he always insist on the names? She couldn't invent names; that had always caused her trouble.

"The name of the ship, dear, was *Halcyon Days*, not very original, I must say; we were on the C deck, second class. The first night out you were seasick. Then you were all right. The ship had an orchestra and we danced in the little ballroom. You flirted with that woman whose room was down the hall. You were quite awful about it."

The outline of a smile appeared on his face. "Who?"

She saw his smile and was pleased. "I don't remember," she said. "Why should I remember her name? She was just a silly woman with vulgar dark-red hair."

"What was her name?" He asked.

"I told you, I don't remember."

"Yes, you do," he said. His mouth was open, his filmy eyes looked in her direction.

"All right," she said, “her name was Peggy."

"Peggy," he said, briefly sighing.

"Yes, Peggy," she said, "and you made yourself ridiculous around her, but I think she liked you, and I remember I once caught you too at the railing, looking at the waters of the Pacific go by as the ship turned westward."

"Was I bad?" He asked.

"You were all right. You were like any man. I didn't mind. Men are like that. You bought her drinks."

"What did she drink?"

"Old fashions," she said, "An odd drink for a single woman to order. I would've thought she would prefer Martinis or Manhattans, but no, she liked bourbon mixed with sugar waters and bitters." She felt herself going too far in this improvisation and hauled herself back in. "What I minded was that she would not always close the door to her stateroom. You would look in and there she was."

"Yes," he said, "There she was."

"There she was," she continued, "With that terrible red hair of hers billowing down to her shoulders, and you standing in the hallway staring at her."

"You caught me?"

"Yes, I did, but I didn't blame you. You were so attractive to women."

"I was?"

"Yes. You were so handsome in those days, and so witty, and when you sat down at the piano and sang those tunes, it was hard for women to resist. Blandishments, that's what they called them, your blandishments."

"Really? Could I play the piano?" He was smiling, perhaps thinking of the Pacific or of Peggy.

"Yes," she said. "You could play and sing. Though I've heard better, I've certainly heard worse. You sang to me. You'd sing to anybody."

"To Peggy?" He asked.

"Well, to anyone," she said. When she saw his smile fade, she said, "Yes, and to her too," in an effort to charm. "All I know is it was 50 years ago."

He closed his eyes and stretched his thin legs. She saw a smile across his face and was pleased with herself.

"In Hawaii," she said, "We stayed at the Royal Palm Hotel." Although she had once been on a ship, she had never been in Hawaii and was speaking more slowly now as she tried to see the scene. "It was on the beach, the famous one with the name, and the sands were white, as white as chalk. We played Shuffleboard."

"We did?" He asked.

"Yes," she said. "We drove around the island and climbed the extinct volcano, Mount Johnson. There's a lake inside Mount Johnson, and you went swimming in it, and there were large birds, enormous blue birds, flying over our heads, and you called them the archangel birds and said that God had sent them to us as a sign."

"A sign of what?" He asked.

"Oh, a sign of our happiness."

"We were happy?"

"Yes," she said. "We were."

"Always?" He asked.

"Well, not always. No one is always happy. Anyway, Mount Johnson was one day, and on another day we went diving for pearls. You found an oyster with a pearl in it. I still wear it on a pin."

He looked over at her and searched her face and chest and arms.

"Oh, not today," she said. "I'm not wearing it today."

The sound of the oxygen hissing out of the respirator tube fatigued her. She would not be able to continue this much longer. It was like combat of some subtle kind. She hurried on.

"On the island we picked enormous flowers, and every evening we sat down for dinner by the water and you put a gardenia in my hair one night. We ate pineapples and broke open coconuts, and at moonrise, the sea breezes came in through the window of our room where we were lying in the hotel. We were so in love. We had room service bring us champagne and you read poetry to me."

Okay," he said. "What did you look like?"

She clasped her hands in her lap. "I was beautiful." She paused. "You said so."

"The sound," he said.

"What sound?"

"There was a sound."

"I don't remember a sound," she said.

"There was one," he insisted.

"Where?" She asked.

"In the room."

"Yes?"

"It came in through the window," he whispered.

"From where?"

"From the sea."

"I don't remember it," she said. "What sort of sound was it?"

"A note."

"A musical note?" She asked.

"A note like this," he said. Then he made a terrible noise from his throat and his mouth that mixed with the sound of the respirator.

"I don't remember it. Oh, yes," she said, suddenly inspired. "There was an orchestra right outside our window, and one night it played all night long," she said, briefly swept up.

"No, that wasn't it," he said.

"It wasn't?"

"No," he said. "It came from the sea."

"The Pacific," she said.

"Yes, far away, over the horizon, from thousands of miles." He made the terrible sound again.

"Oh, that's a Foghorn, dear. That's the sound you're making."

"We were never in Hawaii," he said suddenly with conviction. "You're just making this up."

“Oh, we were there," she told him. "You just don't remember. Oh, yes. I remember that sound now. It was a siren from downtown Honolulu."

"No," he said. "It came from the sea."

"Well, how can you be sure?" She asked.

Suddenly he turned toward her and looked directly at her. "I hear it now," he said. "I hear it right this minute."

"You poor dear," she said. "Think of Hawaii."

"I'll try," he told her. "Do you hear it?"

"What?"

"That sound?"

"No."

"Well, listen."

She sat listening. The Muzak from the hallway had fallen silent. From outside, there was a faint low humming.

"Hear it?" He asked.

"Yes," she said faintly.

"I heard it first there," he told her.

"So did I," she said.

"I feel a little better now," he said. "I feel sleepy."

"Go to sleep dear," she said. "Take a little nap."

"You'll be back?" He asked.

"Yes," she said. "Tomorrow."

"Where else did we go?" He asked her.

"Oh, we went," she said, "to Egypt where we crawled through the pyramids. We went through the fjords in Norway. We saw wonders. We saw many wonders."

"Well, tell me tomorrow," he said, as his eyes closed.

"I will," she said. She kissed him on the forehead, stood up, and walked to the doorway. She looked back at him; he seemed to be about to fall asleep, but he also seemed to be listening for the sound he claimed to hear. She gazed at him for a moment and then went down the hallway, past the nurses, bowing her head for a moment before she went out the front door to the bus stop. She was thinking of tomorrow's story.

She would claim that they had traveled to Argentina, but what did people do there besides speak Spanish? Perhaps they had gardens?. Why not the largest garden, the garden of branches and twigs? Maybe it would sound better in Spanish. Still, after all these years, and despite the vandals, geometrical and intact. Thanks.

Lisa: Thank you. Such a beautiful reading. Charlie Baxter, you once said you moved from poetry to short fiction because you needed a larger canvas. How else does the short story as a form serve you today?

Charles: Well, I may have said that I went from poetry to the short story, which is a leap that many poets make, but that's not quite true. The leap I made was from poetry to the novel. I wrote three bad novels that were unpublishable and fortunately were not published, and they took years of my life. I realized I was not actually learning how to write good fiction by writing these novels, so I thought, well, I will try writing stories instead of novels.

The story form is much more exposed and transparent. If you make a mistake in a short story, you often can tell right away that you've made a mistake. To the larger aspect, the larger question that you're asking. What I found about the short story that I liked was a kind of immediacy. The fact that when you're writing a short story, you have to, generally speaking, stay in the present moment of time. You can certainly insert history, you can insert flashbacks, but I don't like flashbacks very much. What short story writing trained me to do was to write scenes that would exist in the present and that had a kind of immediacy which I hadn't learned how to do by writing novels.

Lisa: Fascinating. One problem people experience with the short story is what a friend of yours once called the literary one-night stand, the feeling you have finishing a story and you realize the relationship is over. Do you go through this yourself when you finish writing a short story?

Charles: Not so much. [chuckles] I did with the last book of stories. With *There's Something I Want You to Do*, I found that I liked several of the characters whom I had invented in the early story so much so that I wanted to bring them back. It's the ecology of characters, you don't want to waste characters if you can help it. I think there are many writers now who are interested in books of linked stories.

I never felt as a reader that I was experiencing a one-night stand by reading other people's stories. I thought if a story is good enough and strong enough, it stays with you. It doesn't go away, it becomes a permanent thing in your imagination. Even though my friend said that, it's not something I actually believe. I don't think stories are like one-night stands. I think they are very important moments in your life that you do not forget.

Lisa: I'm so glad you mentioned *There's Something I Want You to Do*, which is a favorite collection of mine. I'm told that that quote, "there's something I want you to do," is something your mother said to you.

Charles: Yes, rest her soul, my mother of blessed memory. When I got home from school, often the first thing she would say to me is, there's something I want you to do. I often had, when I got home from school, a lot of, as we used to say, chores, and that phrase stayed in my head. I'll try to make this as short as I can. When I began to think about the nature of certain kinds of stories, I realized that many of them are built on what I call request moments.

Request moments usually involve three things. There's something I want you to do if you're really my friend or if you really love me, or if you care about me, you'll do it. Then there's a story clock, there's something I want you to do and I want you to do it by tomorrow. And not that I'm comparing myself to him, but I realized that Shakespeare often use request moments. Hamlet starts with a request moment. The ghost of Hamlet's father has a request moment. *King Lear* begins with a request moment. King Lear has a request for his daughters.

It's a basic structure, I think, of stories because it's a basic part of human life, as is the dare. I dare you to do X. If you do X, you will prove something by. These are wonderful catalysts for certain kinds of narratives. Every one of the stories in *There's Something I Want You to Do* has a request moment in it somewhere.

Lisa: That's what I love about that collection, is that device, really nicely done. You said writer's block is just a refusal to fall in love. What do you mean by that?

Charles: I know there are a lot of different spurs to writing and many different kinds of catalysts that writers have. I don't, in my own experience, feel that I can usually get a story going unless, in some sense, I have fallen in love with the situation or some of the characters or even the setting. I have to give myself over to these things. Writer's block, for me, feels very much like a refusal to love something enough to write about it.

That doesn't mean that we're always going to be writing about peaches and cream and wonderful days when people are in love, you also have to love all the darkness to be able to write about that

as well. When I'm feeling emotionally chilly and I can't give myself over to a situation, that's when I have trouble writing, and that's when I have a dry period. When there's something I care about enough, then I can write.

Lisa: Really good answer. Your work is also associated with regions, specifically the Midwest, and you called the Midwest imagination's home for you in the same way that Mississippi is for Faulkner and various other writers writing out of their regions, particularly Michigan and Minnesota. Minnesota has meant Lake Wobegon and Minnesota Nice, but it's also where George Floyd was murdered. Likewise, Michigan, we had a school shooting this week. There have been 100 mass shootings in Michigan since 2014. How is that affecting your approach?

Charles: In many ways. My last novel, *The Sun Collective* is full of — I shouldn't say full of, but there are in that book a number of dialogues that I have had with street people whom I have encountered just in walking around downtown Minneapolis where I live. I think that if you live anywhere long enough, you begin to absorb some of the beauties and some of the tensions of that place. *There's Something I Want You to Do* is very much set around the Mississippi River.

My last novel is set very much in downtown Minneapolis, but I think it's tricky talking about a region as being an absolute determinant of somebody's writing. Toni Morrison who's from Lorain, Ohio, but I haven't often seen her described as a Midwestern writer.

I share a childhood and an adolescence with Garrison Keillor in Minnesota, but I don't think our writing is at all similar. I think what happens is that certain features of any locale begin to seep down into the writing, partly because you become accustomed to seeing the way people live, and you get accustomed to the way they talk, and you get accustomed to their gestures, and you begin to have a certain sort authority over how they react and act.

It's a little bit like saying that in Grace Paley's stories we're used to seeing New Yorkers, and in John Cheever's stories we're used to seeing commuters, and in Edward P. Jones' stories we see the African American inhabitants of Washington, DC, the unofficial part of that city. A setting is not only the place, it's the people that inhabit it. I think we do our best to convey in our writing what it's like to live in such a place. You mentioned Chicago as Stuart Dybek does in writing his stories about Chicago.

Lisa: You mentioned your admiration for Stuart Dybek, you called him a genius. I, being a Chicago girl, also agree, but why do you say that about him as a short story writer?

Charles: Stuart's fiction has always been interesting to me. Few people write about childhood and adolescence as well as he does, and that sense of wonder that can overtake an adolescent or a young adult, and the result of that is that his fiction exists in [an] interesting place that's somewhere between realism and something else.

It's not magical realism, but there's something almost enchanted about the way that Chicago, which to an outsider would look like just the city along the lake, but in his fiction, it's transformed into a place where almost anything could happen. I like that. I like it when fiction starts in realism and takes us someplace else. It's very similar to the wonder that we feel when we're children and someone says once upon a time.

Lisa: I really appreciate that. You've also said that art should be an antidote to speed culture. What did you mean by that?

Charles: I don't know when I said that. I have a feeling that I made that statement even before the internet and email and social media and Twitter. What I've thought for a long time is that in fact, although people can sometimes come out of a movie and somebody asks, "What did you think of it?" They'll say, "Oh, it was slow. It was too slow." Maybe because I'm in a particular generation, I like art that isn't fast all the time. I think it's possible that we're all beginning to suffer from motion sickness and speed sickness.

I think the pace of movies, particularly action movies, I can't watch anymore, the cutting is too fast. I feel that what I want is a kind of art that takes its time and that allows me to pay attention, rather than to be surprised and shocked and amazed all the time. Somebody, it's not Donald Barthelme, but somebody once said, "There's no tedium like the tedium of being surprised all the time."

Lisa: It's excellent. I love that. We have some questions from the audience and Manuela asks, "What's the biggest challenge you've set for yourself in writing a short story and how did you go about overcoming it?"

Charles: It's a great question. At first, the greatest challenge for me was learning particularly what to take out. I felt the young writer's insecurity, which is that I have to stuff everything I know into the story. In my first book of stories, *Harmony of the World*, there are a number of stories that are just stuffed with details that if I were to write them all over again, I would take out.

The other real challenge that I found as a writer was drawing away from myself. Once I had written the stories, in which my autobiography was in some sense processed into the stories, I had to go somewhere else for other material, and that's a bigger leap, the leap in which you're no longer writing about yourself, you're writing about what you have observed. The great challenge and the great pleasure, finally, of inhabiting somebody else's skin and looking at the world, not as you would look at it, but as that person looks at it. For me, that's a great pleasure. I found myself very happy when I wasn't writing about myself anymore.

Lisa: Mina complements the story you read from and asks, "How do you know when a short story is done? Do you sometimes continue to revise stories even after they are published?"

Charles: Rarely. I don't know. The usual, or a usual answer is, stories have a beginning, middle, and an end. In "Scheherazade," she comes into his room, she starts telling him a story. Midway through, he says, "You're making this all up," and she tries to regain her footing by making up more details that make him feel pleasure. The story is over when she leaves. There's a beginning, there's a middle, and there's an end. Often, you find yourself skidding past where the ending of a story should be, and explaining what you've already said. That's what you need to cut. Americans, I think, they explain too much. I've learned to stop the story at the moment when the energy goes out of it.

Lisa: So important. Susan asks, "What inspired this wonderful story, and what year was it written?"

Charles: It was written in 1988. I was teaching at Wayne State University in Detroit. I thought of the story as I was walking from my office down to the class I was about to teach. What inspired it, I think, was that almost all of us, if you're my age, have gone into assisted care facilities and run to somebody whom you loved who is maybe beginning to lose a memory. In my case, it was my Aunt

Helen. Something had been turning in my head for a while about the possibility of going into a place like that and lying about what a person's life had been just in order to give that person a moment of happiness or pleasure.

Lisa: David asks, "You mentioned that when you make a mistake in the short story, you know right away. What is an example of a mistake?"

Charles: There's so many and I've made all of them. Shall I list them? Telling the story from the wrong point of view. Starting the story too early, and therefore, explaining things that you don't need to explain. Having too many point of view shifts or starting a story without — how can I put this? Starting a story and then evading the conflict that you have set up in.

Many of us who write find ourselves avoiding conflict — I'm a little bit like this — avoiding conflict in real life, but it's not something that you can do in a short story. If you've set up a conflict, you have to aim the story toward where it is. Other mistakes, there are plenty of them. Having villains who are too easy, not putting enough pressure on the language, so that the language just lies there flat on the ground.

One of the things I like about the short story is that it's a first cousin or maybe a closer relation to poetry and some of the greatest stories often read like poems. I'm not crazy about prose poems as stories, though there are a few great ones, but I do like it when a lot of pressure has been put on the language and it begins to sail off in a particular direction. I like stories that embody a kind of silence as well.

Lisa: Dolan asks, "I've been teaching the lessons from your book, *The Art of Subtext*, for years because it was so life-changing for me as a writer. Can you talk a little bit about what you are thinking these days about subtext in the story? Specifically, I'm thinking of what you had to say about selective listening and denial."

Charles: I think I said in the book that these days, given the internet and given all of the social media that we're exposed to and all of the screen culture that we're part of, that we have to pay attention to the way that people are not paying attention anymore, that is, particularly in dialogue scenes. I think it's important for writers to indicate when somebody is no longer listening to you. It's important to notice how characters are listening selectively or they only want to answer one part of what you said.

I think social media is generally without a subtext. Social media usually says what is on the person's mind at the moment that that person thinks of it. Literature at its best gives us not only what a person is saying, but what the person may be implying and the way that other people do or do not hear what that character has said. I think subtexts are more important now than ever.

Lisa: This is the last question. "There's been a resurgence of discussion of the need for writers to have time for wool gathering, daydreaming, staring into space. How do you cultivate that time in your life?"

Charles: You find a comfortable chair. I've never been able to write unless I'm near a window. I absolutely have to have daylight and some distance that I can look off in the distance at nothing at all. I try also not to look at the screen while I'm writing. I'm looking at the screen now, but if I were

at this laptop writing, I wouldn't be looking at the screen, I'd be looking up there because I'm trying to see my characters, I'm trying to hear what they're saying, I'm trying to see what they're doing.

Any place where you're comfortable and at rest is a good place for this sort of daydreaming. A friend of mine calls it couch time, but I think when you're writing, you're daydreaming all the time anyway.

Lisa: Thank you so much for that.

Charles: Thank you, Lisa. Thank you for the questions.

Lisa: Now we move on to the conferral of the actual award. Here to present the PEN/Malamud Award is Janna Malamud Smith. Janna Malamud Smith is a writer and psychotherapist. She is the author of four books *Private Matters: In Defense of the Personal Life, A Potent Spell: Mother Love and the Power of Fear, My Father Is A Book: A Memoir of Bernard Malamud* and *An Absorbing Errand: How Artists and Craftsmen Make Their Way to Mastery*.

Her work has appeared nationally and internationally in publications including the *New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The International Herald Tribune*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *American Scholar*, *Family Circle*, and *The Threepenny Review*, to name just a few. She continues to work as a clinical social worker, mostly teaching psychotherapy in a hospital based department of psychiatry, as well as in private practice.

On a personal note, I'm privileged to know Janna Malamud Smith as a friend, and I wish that you were able to know her as I do because she is always the light in the room. Please welcome Janna Malamud Smith.

Janna Malamud Smith: Thank you so much, Lisa, and thank you all for coming tonight. Charles, you made me want to be a live audience because I was laughing so much and I regretted that we couldn't create that feedback loop with that marvelous story. My father, Bernard Malamud, died 35 years ago in 1986 shortly before his 72nd birthday. His death occurred exactly half my lifetime ago, and the years have gradually faded the vivid emotions I felt for him.

The once animate man often seems still now and far away. I enjoy giving this award each year, not only to be part of honoring an outstanding contemporary writer, but because it offers me the occasion to call my father to mind and to share him with you. What can I briefly tell you about him? He lived to write and believed that the nuance, complexity and deep feeling captured by language and literature represented a pinnacle human creation, especially in the face of human being's limited humanity.

My father grew up poor. He was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, and English was his second language. He worked daily for 20 years in adulthood to teach himself to write well enough before he began to publish, or to write well before he began to publish. When he did publish stories, garner praise and win awards, he was deeply relieved to be lifted from years of poverty. He enjoyed his improved status and new authority, but he still primarily lived to write.

That said, he was also an engaged parent and made sure my brother and I had attention from him as well as books and music lessons and all kinds of opportunities. He felt pained by his early deprivation and made sure to offer us something richer. He had a share of unruly impulses and also

tremendous self discipline. He wrote most mornings from 9:00 to 1:00. He enjoyed teaching and stayed with it part-time, even when he could afford not to, because he felt gratitude toward his own teachers who, starting in elementary school, had taught him English and offered him refuge away from his troubled home.

My father loved telling jokes. It was part of the post-meal entertainment at the many dinner parties he and my mother hosted for friends and colleagues. One of his favorites was about a man and a woman so overcome by passion while walking around Paris one spring evening that they slipped under their parked car to make love. Still in the thick of it, the couple gradually realized that someone was tapping on the man's shoulder. They looked up and saw a John Dame who shrugged and said, "Nisha, Madam, I am so sorry to disturb you, but I thought you might want to know that your car has been stolen."

Dad chuckled in spite of himself each time he delivered the punchline. He was a serious person drawn to explore suffering and the brief moments of mitigation or redemption that might follow from it. He once said that "life is tragedy filled with joy." Throughout his life, my father made time to read each day and filled bookcases with the volumes he particularly respected or loved. I think of the books by PEN/Malamud winners as ones he would have bought and kept, read with pleasure, sometimes with envy.

In truth, I now think he would be honored to be in the pantheon of all the winners. He would certainly enjoy it. I can see him pausing in his reading, taking the pen he kept at hand, and underlining words or sentences that did freshly and well what he admired or aspired to do himself. Thus, as the conveyor of his appreciation as well as all of ours and my own, I am pleased and honored to give the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story to Charles Baxter.

Charles: Thank you, Janna. As I all already said, I'm deeply honored to have been given this award. My thanks to PEN/Faulkner, to PEN/Malamud, and to the members of the Malamud family. This is a very happy occasion for me.

Janna: Thanks to you.

Charles: I'm pleased and proud because we're all on Zoom, this is the award. Thank you.

Lisa: Thank you, and thanks so much to everyone for attending this evening. PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director, Gwydion Suilebhan, will now say a few words.

Gwydion Suilebhan: Hello, everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan. It's nice to see you all. Thank you for coming. I want to thank Charles Baxter, Deborah Tannen, Lisa Page, Stephanie Grant, American University, Janna Malamud Smith and Paul Malamud for making tonight possible. I also really want to thank all of you for making this such a terrific and meaningful event. We really couldn't do anything we do without your participation.

Here at almost [the] end of the year, we've been asking people to tell us whose words they've been shaped by. We all have particular writers whose books have been unforgettably important, whose books have inspired us and changed us, but not everyone has the same access to the rich literary experience that we've all had here tonight. PEN/Faulkner is devoted to providing that access, particularly for young people who attend low-income schools in DC.

We want to make sure that everyone gets to read, to meet writers, to claim their voice, to see themselves in books. I'm going to ask to have our donation link dropped into the chat window.

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

If you have the means, we would appreciate even a small contribution to that effort. We're counting on you to make sure that our work, which is even more exciting now than ever before, can continue. Thank you in advance for lending a hand, and thank you again for joining us tonight in celebrating the PEN/Malamud Award. Have a great night.