The 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award Celebration

May 2, 2022

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 42nd PEN/Faulkner Award Celebration. Featuring this year's award judges, Eugenia Kim, Rebecca Makkai, Rion Amilcar Scott, our winner Rabih Alameddine, our finalists Nawaaz Ahmed, Caroline de Robertis, Carolyne Ferrell, and Imbolo Mbue. Our 2022 PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion Oprah Winfrey and tonight's master of ceremony is Maureen Corrigan. Along with special venue appearances by Jason Reynolds, Stephen King, Luis Alberto Urrea, Angie Thomas, Francine Prose, and Tope Folarin. Now to kick off the evening let's welcome PEN/Faulkner's Board President Susan Keselenko Coll.

Dolen: Hello, everyone. Our Board President Susan Coll could not be with us this evening. My name is Dolen Perkins-Valdez and I'm the chair of the board of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. On behalf of our board and staff, it is my pleasure to welcome you to the 42nd celebration of the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. I'm speaking to you live from Washington, DC and while we wish we were gathered in person, one of the benefits of continuing in this virtual format is that we have people tuning in from all over the country and around the world. Let's begin by raising a glass to the celebrated writers who are here with us tonight. I propose a toast to fiction itself. These have remained challenging times for purveyors of the written word with frequent and sometimes Orwellian thoughts on literature and yet we all write on.

Fiction teaches empathy, resilience, and builds emotional intelligence. We need this more than ever. We are proud that this is part of the work that we continue to do at PEN/Faulkner. Bringing authors together to discuss some of the most important issues of our day. We bring those same values to our education programs which are central to our mission and which have continued to thrive even during these challenging times in our nation's schools. I would like to thank all of you for being here tonight, for your generous donations especially our co-chairs Mary and Robert Haft, and Katherine Boone, and Joshua Geltzer. Please, if you have not already made a donation consider doing so tonight. Instructions for donating are right below this video and no amount is too small.

Now I have the great pleasure of introducing our MC Maureen Corrigan. Maureen's voice is likely familiar to you as the award-winning book critic on NPR's *Fresh Air*. She is also a reviewer and columnist for the *Washington Post* and is an author herself. Maureen, we are so happy to have you here with us tonight.

Maureen: Thank you so much, Dolen. I'm delighted to be here tonight to honor this year's spectacular writers. We have a sparking evening ahead of us including visits with some of

America's most beloved literary figures. Once again as Dolen said it has been a challenging year. We've all tried our best to pivot. To continue to do the work of writing, teaching, bookselling, publishing, and criticism. All of this work of course is essential to the functioning of democracy.

As book people, most of us are accustomed to solitude but the solitude that continues on and off to inform this pandemic is something that's been imposed on us not chosen. Sealed into our little Zoom boxes as we are tonight. Often masked when we're in contact with others. Many of us feel separated from the world by split-second time delays and a thin layer of lint over our mouths.

Language, the essential element of books, counters the circumscription of the world. Language widens our perceptions and deepens our sensibilities and that's precisely what some people are afraid of. Along with the ongoing pandemic, we've been witnessing a viral resurgence of anti-intellectualism in American life. The number of books challenged and banned in the past year is the most recorded since the American Libraries Association began to keep track. Those banned books range from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to math textbooks. Overwhelmingly, these bannings target books by people of color, and the LGBTQ+ community. The consolation is that such bannings affirm what all of us already know, "Books are dangerous." They're dangerous because they have the power to change how we think about the world, and how we think about each other. Language breaks through and enters directly into our heads, and occasionally into our hearts.

Tonight, I'm honored to introduce to you some of the people who've written, taught, published, and promoted some of that language that's broken through. Since 1980, PEN/Faulkner has supported the literary world by honoring great writers and hosting public conversations about literature. For decades, the organization has also brought authors, books, and writing instructors into low-income DC schools to inspire the next generation of readers and writers, all at no cost to students and educators. I hope you'll take a moment during tonight's program to make a contribution to PEN/Faulkner to continue that vital work. Let's have a look at some of the programs and people that make PEN/Faulkner unique.

[You can donate to PEN/Faulkner at: 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: 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: 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 combined 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.

[music]

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. 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.

[music]

Maureen: To celebrate its 40th-anniversary, PEN/Faulkner established a new commendation, the PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. The award recognizes a lifetime devotion to literary advocacy and to commitment to inspiring new generations of readers and writers. Introducing tonight's winner is PEN/Faulkner board member Tope Folarin.

Tope: Thank you much, Maureen. I would not be here if it weren't for Oprah. I mean that in two ways, I would not be here if I hadn't spent much of my youth watching her talk show and absorbing the lessons she offered to us, her enthusiastic audience. I also absorbed the idea from her example and many of her**[00:10:23]** guests that I too could achieve

incredible things. This seemed unlikely at the time, especially since I was a son of two working-class immigrants who lacked any connections but she had done it, I told myself repeatedly, she had achieved incredible things. Maybe that meant I could do so as well.

The second way Oprah has made my presence here possible is that she paid for my senior year of college. I'd already been kicked out of college when I wrote her a letter in desperation, I simply asked if she could help me. A few weeks later, I was told that I was the recipient of an Oprah Winfrey Scholarship and that I will achieve my dream of becoming the first college graduate in my family.

These anecdotes are connected to the reason why we're all here. We're all lovers of books, and Oprah has spent a good part of her career, championing books and arguing for the enduring importance of stories and storytelling. She is our culture's great literary ambassador and over 25 years after she started her book club, Oprah continues to assert that books are not merely enjoyable, but that they are essential.

Oprah has also demonstrated through her life and her actions, but the imagination remains the most powerful force we have at our disposal. Her celebration and veneration of books is in the end, a celebration and veneration of those who do the hard work of imagining the past, describing the present, and envisioning the future we might one day inhabit. Oprah reminds us that authors are creators and that we will do well to heed the lessons they have for us. As it happens, Oprah as a creator as well, a creative cultural spaces in which all of us can express ourselves and achieve the impossible.

As a member of the Board of Directors of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, it is my distinct honor to introduce one of the great cultural figures of our age, a tireless champion of books, and an accomplished creator in her own right, the 2022 PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion, Oprah Winfrey.

Oprah: Good evening, everybody. Thank you much for this truly great honor and for the chance to connect with all of you tonight, even though virtually, I like to say there is no best life without books. I can't think of a title I could wear more proudly than to be designated a PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. Since I launched Oprah's Book Club, which is now more than 25 years ago, really, since I first became a reader as a young girl, one of my primary pleasures has been to connect with people around books, and that passion has just endured. My recent selection of Viola Davis is powerful, transcendent memoir, finding me marked our 95th selection and brings such great satisfaction to know that our book club is still going strong and introducing readers around the world to an incredible array of writers and voices.

All of you gathered here tonight, our fellow travelers on our mutual journey to support the essential role of the written word in our culture. The founding principle of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation it's in their actual mission statement, is to "Celebrate literature and foster connections between readers and writers to enrich and inspire both individuals and communities." Count me on board for that mission because I do believe that reading

and writing is a crucial contributor to understanding our world and each other, and to creating empathy within and among communities like you.

My intention over the years in founding and maintaining the book club has been to inspire new generations of readers and writers to extend a bridge across our greatest divides, through learning, through conversation, and grappling with some of the toughest of truths. One of those truths is that we face a watershed moment in literacy and I just commend the work of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation for identifying and addressing the very real challenges the industry is facing.

In part, this moment exists because there are many demands and distractions on people's time and attention. It's sometimes hard to compete with our smartphones and streaming services for time alone with a book. Although for me, I would always rather be alone with a book, but I hear other people have that challenge. It's not just about what we do with our leisure time, the literacy crisis is also a direct byproduct of economic and social inequality, which for too many creates a gap in access to books and libraries. I'm glad to know that PEN continues to shine a bright light and essential light on what's happening in schools and communities in terms of book bannings. We have to support the freedom to read those books that feed our minds and hearts and nourish our souls, books that awaken new understandings and cause us to feel within ourselves that special, aha.

It was your organization's namesake, William Faulkner, who said, "Never be afraid to raise your voice for honesty and compassion against justice and lying and greed." When I selected three books by William Faulkner in 2005 for Oprah's Book Club, *As I Lay Dying*, *The Sound and The Fury*, *Light in August*, we convened what we call the summer Faulkner. I called on Faulkner experts to help us best appreciate and fully get the meaning and intention of those books. Yes, there were those who told us they still didn't get Faulkner, but the large majority felt hugely gratified that they'd finally gotten to read these classics, these American novels in a meaningful and thoughtful way alongside others who were also eager to tackle an author that they've been told was too difficult.

My team and I watched *As I Lay Dying* shot to the New York Times Best Seller list number two. It was a great feeling to know that we played a part in that, but that sales bump wasn't the root of our celebration, what I loved about that moment was that it underscored what I deeply believed that belonging to a community of readers makes every reader an aspirational one. Open to new voices and new characters, however different, eager to receive and understand another's point of view and empathize with it. In other words, back to the mission of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, "To celebrate literature and to foster connections between readers and writers."

Frederick Douglas observed that once you learn to read, you will be forever free. Thanks to all of you who write books, who publish books, who support books, who read books. Thank you for inviting me here tonight as a newly Crown PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. Have a great evening everybody.

Maureen: Congratulations to Oprah Winfrey for being selected as this year's PEN/Faulkner Literary Champion. There is no one like her, particularly in the way she embodies literary generosity and inspiration. That same spirit infuses everything PEN/Faulkner does. You don't have to take my word for it, here are some of America's most beloved writers to tell you why PEN/Faulkner matters.

Angie: Hi, I'm Angie Thomas.

Luis: Hi, I'm Luis Alberto Urrea

Francine: Hi, I'm Francine Prose.

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

Stephen: Hi, I'm Stephen King. 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 and PEN/Faulkner recognizes that.

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.

Angie: Because of them and their programs, so many more people have been enriched, so many lives have been further changed and the importance of books is further recognized.

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. It's going to leave a legacy behind as all these young folks grow up to further impart the fact that PEN/Faulkner is important and a necessary force in this work.

Angie: I'm appreciative of the event I got to do with them several years ago. I still remember it. 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: 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.

Maureen: It's now my pleasure to introduce someone whom I admire as a novelist and I treasure as a friend. He also happens to be the chair of the PEN/Faulkner Awards Committee. Here's Louis Bayard.

Louis: Thank you, Maureen. I want to briefly introduce our three judges, the better to love on them a little bit. Eugenia Kim's novels, *The Calligrapher's Daughter* and *The Kinship of Secrets* have earned her the Borders Original Voices Award and a Washington Post best historical novel and Critics' Pick. Rebecca Makkai is the Chicago-based author of such novels as *The Great Believers*, which was a finalist for both the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award and recipient of the ALA Carnegie Medal.

Rion Amilcar Scott is the author of two highly lauded story collections, *Insurrections*, and *The World Doesn't Require You*, which have earned him among other honors the PEN Bingham Prize for debut fiction and inclusion in the best American science fiction and fantasy of 2020. As you can tell, they are all formidable as individuals. They are equally formidable as a trio sifting through hundreds of eligible novels and short story collections from 204 publishers, and setting at last and five gifted authors whose work underscores the enduring power and relevance of the fictional enterprise.

Tonight those finalists will be introduced by our judges, and will then read brief selections from their work before answering the question we have posed for them, why is the story you've told of unique significance in the present moment? We hope you'll enjoy getting to know them 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 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award judge, Eugenia Kim.

[music]

Eugenia: Like peeking through the fog, fog that is so beautifully described in Nawaaz Ahmed's elegant novel *Radiant Fugitives.* Two adult sisters and their mother seek clarity amidst their history of doubt, betrayal, abandonment, but also contrasted against their shared history of tenderness, tradition, and love of literature. Seema in San Francisco, and

a younger Tahera who has left her family behind in Irvine, Texas, are reunited with their mother Nafeesa who is dying, and comes to visit Seema. Nafeesa has come to America from Chennai against the wishes of her husband, who has disowned Seema when she came out as a lesbian 16 years ago.

At the nexus of this triangle of their free-spirited Seema to devout Muslim Tahera and their mother is Seema's unborn child, for Seema is nine months pregnant from a short-lived marriage. Nawaaz Ahmed makes the soon-to-be baby the omniscient narrator, a daring point of view for a debut novelist to take, but his exquisite prose enchants us into the story that examines relationships with a keen sensitivity and probes the full-hearted questions raised within the text.

What is sisterhood? What is motherhood? Can yawning differences be mended by the pool of memory? Does Tahera's strict Muslim practice alienate her from real connection? How can the tenets of religion frame one's life in the midst of anti-Muslim bias that threatens to upend Tahera's Texas family, and the many immigrant Muslim families in America? Is the practice of religion meant to affirm one's faith, or is it meant to affirm righteousness in the face of conflict?

Both the father of Seema's child and seamless lover Lee want a parental role in the baby's life, but Seema is undecided about either preferring her sister to take on that role should anything happen. Can love withstand historic rivalry or the boundaries of family and choice? Tonight, we recognize Nawaaz Ahmed's masterful storytelling in *Radiant Fugitives*, which explores the complexities of intertwined relationships, questions the meanings of faith and love, and examines our humanity with grace and compassion. I'm so honored tonight to present to you, Nawaaz Ahmed.

Nawaaz: "Oh, grandmother. You're not asleep yet. The voices from the kitchen are no lullaby. Your daughters are fighting and you blame yourself. There must have been something you could have done before the rifts widened to such chasms. It's your elder daughter you are agonizing over, it's my not yet born self. Who's there to care for us? You abandon Seema when she needed you most and you won't be there when she needs you again. You have little time to make amends, a few months, perhaps a year and there's little you can do for Seema now, other than purge with Tahera to take back sister, but Tahera is stubborn like her father. How unbending she has become over the years, sequestering herself behind her hijab and her five times a day in the mass. You're afraid you no longer know how to reach her. You're afraid you have failed them both.

You pretend to be sleeping when Seema returns to the bedroom, turning away when she climbs into bed so that she can, as she's been doing the last few days, snuggling to you, her belly pressing into your back, one arm resting on your waist. This connection is precious to you. Three generations, mother, daughter, and grandson and somehow its very existence gives you some hope. The sense of life persisting and persevering. There is tomorrow, even if there are not many more tomorrows for you."

Speaks the narrator of *Radiant Fugitives*, newly born Ishraaq who's searching through the past seeking to understand the events that led to his mother's death as she was delivering him. At the heart of these events, our various divisions, divisions within the self, divisions within the family, divisions within the nation, divisions based on the color of our skin, based on who we are attracted to and love and raise children with, who we pray to and what words we hold sacred, where we come from and what we consider home, divisions that I myself have felt acutely as a brown gay Muslim immigrant.

The novel is set in 2010 when we had just elected a president who had spoken of choosing hope over fear and unity of purpose over conflict and discord. I began the novel then and through the two estranged sisters in the novel and the ways they are molded by and react to that social, cultural, and political landscapes I wanted to explore what it would take for them and through them for the nation to really choose hope and unity. This seems all the more urgent now. The nation, indeed the world is more divided than ever. In the face of such divisions, the characters in *Radiant Fugitives* react variously some with dismay and resignation, some protest, some organized and resist, some retaliate. What they find the hardest to do is to look closer to self and home, to accept and love themselves and each other with all their flaws and strengths and differences. If you don't start there, what hopes can we have for the world?

Thank you, Eugenia, for your lovely words about my novel. Thank you, PEN/Faulkner Foundation, and the judges. I'm honored to be here tonight in the company of such visionary writers. I'm grateful to my agent Anjali Singh and editor Dan Smetanka and everyone at Counterpoint Press for championing my work. Thank you all. For those celebrating Eid tonight, Eid Mubarak.

[music]

Jessica: Please welcome 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award Judge Rion Amilcar Scott.

[music]

Rion: Carolina de Robertis's *The President and the Frog* begins with that elemental phrase "Once upon a time" signaling that the reader should settle in to be told something akin to a comforting fairytale or a bedtime story. While this novel does lull us with eloping rhythms of a tale, soon the reader becomes settled into something far more unsettling. In an unnamed Latin American country a man, a national hero reflects on an extraordinary and mythic life. The broad strokes are known and admired by many. The man's been a gorilla battling an authoritarian regime and then a political prisoner tortured and forgotten and then upon his release, he achieved his most triumphant form president of the country. One who accused all the pretensions and pump of high political office to live modestly.

In between those broad strokes, there is the nuance human the public doesn't get a chance to see. The man still recovering from the years of prison, torture, and abuse he suffered in defense of his ideals. The president we learned still tends to the emotional

wounds he earned over his long years of solitary confinement. There he shared lengthy dialogues with his only companion, a stern frog with whom he reviews the choices of his life.

What a bold and odd narrative choice, watching a man's personal social, philosophical, and political evolution through the eyes of an amphibian, a voice that's by turns hilarious and disquieting. Despite the strangeness of the narrative conceit and the dispassionate and sentimental voice of the frog, De Robertis never hits a false note. The story unrolls smoothly with the feel of a dream. This is a book that ultimately asks us to sift through the layers of our memory, our history, and our dreams to witness the ways in which we've constructed and fortified ourselves. In a world that seems hell-bent on marching toward fascism, we must all dig deeper as the frog told the president to discover just how much we have to give. Now an author I'm richer for having read Carolina de Robertis.

Carolina: Good evening.Thank you so much to the PEN/Faulkner Foundation to the incredibly esteemed judges, especially Rion Amilcar Scott for that incredibly generous and thoughtful reflection. To my phenomenal fellow finalists and awardees and my agents and the incredible team at Knopf, especially Carole Baron and Abigail Endler. To each of you here this evening, I am overjoyed and honored beyond words to share this time with you.

This excerpt takes place when the protagonist has been in brutal solitary confinement for years and he's finally allowed access to books, but only science books because according to the authorities, anything involving human life could be subversive. He read every word the way a starved dog nosed a bone, agronomy, biology, the span of galaxies through outer space, the molecular structure of water, the cellular structure of everything you could call alive.

Every page, a bomb for the eyes, his mind let to meet the consciousness imprinted in those texts drew on sentences as rivers that could carry him afloat. The authorities could not have guessed that for all they had tried to avoid any tones of human thought, they had given him the closest thing to holy books for a man like him. No God but nature. No God, but the collective us. He looked for the collective us in those pages sought oracular hints for human mysteries.

What are we? He thought ferociously. What are we? In the crush of all this glory, mitochondria and magma and protons and holy smoke seeds, where do we find ourselves? One answer that kept rising, we were not built to be alone. Ecology, the most subversive subject of them all, the ultimate secret socialist tracked. We were made to connect and to give an effing crap about each other. It's right there in the science, whether it's the spread of a disease, the balance of a food chain, or ripple in the weather, everything this one does affects that one and so forth and so forth on end. Even stars forge their own gravity to keep planets in orbit through the cold and lonely dark.

As for the question of significance, to me, *The President and the Frog* is a parable for any and all of us tempted to despair or to numbness or to giving up on full engagement with this

gorgeous broken world. It's inspired by real-life former Uruguayan President José Mujica whom we affectionately call El Pepe among Uruguayans. His mind-blowing journey from a tortured political prisoner in the bleakest of circumstances to a head of state and international beacon of progressive hope. It's based on some truths like his offhand comment once that he in part survived the brutal incarceration by talking to frogs.

It's rooted in real Latin American histories of authoritarianism resistance and cultural transformation. It's not just about Latin America or history, I wrote this book for all of us right here right now. For me, novels are fueled by burning questions and one of the questions driving *The President and the Frog* is how can we fully live and breathe and exist in a world that is bent on our erasure? A question that is very alive for me as a queer and genderqueer woman and immigrant and Latina in this country.

Another question driving this is how do we make a world where all are safe and free? We don't have that yet to state the obvious. We look around and see violence and war and climate crisis, deeply entrenched systemic racism, attacks on immigrants and on trans and queer youth, and even a slow-motion coup attempt that threatens our democracy and our humanity.

Given everything we face it may seem naive to even speak a longing like this for a world where all of us are safe and free but I do long for it with every fiber of my being and I believe in the power of naming our desires. If we don't dream it, we'll never have it so we have to dare to dream. I also know that many of you share this desire with me that none of us are alone with this longing. That the truth is for all the horrors around us, we know we're also surrounded by dazzling movements for change and infinite stories of resilience, power, beauty, and renewal. I intended this novel as a love song for all of us who dare to dream and to reach for that power, that renewable, those possibilities for brighter futures continuously being born. I completely believe in us and in the visions that keep us going and sustain us. [Spanish language]. Thank you so much.

Jessica: Please welcome 2022 PEN/Faulkner Award Judge Eugenia Kim.

Eugenia: From the very beginning of Carolyn Farrell's breathtaking novel *Dear Miss Metropolitan*, you can see you're in for something wildly unique. Following an epigraph by Tracy K. Smith, the novel starts with the draft of a Queen's metropolitan newspaper feature that is replete with corrections footnotes, and a story that sinks hearts. "Three girls are kidnapped and held hostage in a dilapidated house in the New York City borough of Queens." Held captive for an aggregate of 10 years, the young women become known as the victim girls, the victim females and this is their story.

Among several other points of view, it is told by Fern, Jesenia, and Gwin and augmented by observations from the columnist's Miss Metropolitan who lives near the house where the girls were tortured and raped and who cannot reconcile her ignorance of what was happening in that downtrodden house across the street from hers for years.

There's a kind of succinct labeling Farrell does with places, objects, and people, a labeling that she uses like amulets to evoke an emotion be it horror, or wry humor, yielding a pleasing rhythm like grace notes to the text. Beyond the bold prose, the story is told in jagged fragments with careful titles and judicious page space. The narrative accompanied by quotes excerpts, footnotes, interviews, reports from the future, lists, illustrations, and photographs, mainly taken by Ferrell herself. This book is a rare structural marvel with architecture that highlights the spaces where words cannot be uttered for what they say about terror and inhumanity. Jesenia disappears shortly after giving birth to a girl, and the mystery of her disappearance lingers in those spaces. Also, those spaces reveal what is unsaid about the urge to survive the endurance of love and express the compassion between the victim females during, and especially after their ordeals.

Thankfully, Ferrell takes us into the future of Fern and Gwin and of the baby and shows us their livable outcomes where, while there is never forgetting, there is peace, beauty, and love. Tonight, we are here to celebrate Carolyn Ferrell for her novel, *Dear Miss Metropolitan*. A miracle of a book, surprising, affirming, and tender. I'm so honored to present her Carolyn Ferrell.

Carolyn Ferrell: Thank you, Eugenia, for that very generous introduction. I'm so humble. Thank you. I'm going to read a section of *Dear Miss Metropolitan* entitled *Future Scenario*. "No, I'm not a space alien, and neither is you,' Gwinnie said. We were on the outside, our hides chilled to the bone. It was winter. That much of the weather, I remembered. No Christmas trees, but a forgotten smell of pine saw all around us. We'd been led down the steps in nothing but our birthday suits and the near-invisible residue of Boss bands underwear.

I could have sworn our heads were shaved and clean, but Gwinnie later told me they weren't. 'We had hair,' she said, 'but it might, could have been invisible too.' I nodded, 13 plus 10 years old now. Shivering on the back edge of the ambulance, thin white blankets thrown over our shoulders, I looked oven-baked in this new light. A gingerbread girl, spirit of Christmas past. 'Don't mention food,' Gwinnie said sharply. 'We can't trust these people. They might make us eat their pictures, and I am so damn sick of pictures.' Her voice was different.

Her eyes were different. I felt like crying. 'Gwinnie,' I said. There were people around us, recognizing us. Some took out cameras, some broke out crying. 'Are these girls for real? They are not for real.' The girl next to me began to cry. 'Did you say that my name from now on is Gwinnie?' She asked. Someone opened my mouth and closed it. Moments later, I felt the effects of a pill swimming inside my forehead and closed my eyes. The ambulance drove fast, shaking what was left of our stomachs. Who could fade out? We threw up sand, sawdust, mold, and fake coffee from the drain.

Faces wiped, bottles instead of pills. First stop, the police station, where people petted our heads and made the sign of the cross. Next stop, the blood hospital, where needles slid into the threads that were our veins. One day, two, one week, two, our eyes swam like pills

in our foreheads. Next stop eventually, the ward where doctors, and nurses, and janitors, and lab technicians, and multipurpose blood letters touched our heads and felt around our skin as if we'd been blessed by Jesus, God, and the Virgin Mary all rolled into one. They held lights up to our eyes and asked if we knew who we were, how many fingers, which of our areas were hurting?

Did we know what day it was? Did we know what president it was? Which hurt worse, above or below? What could we remember? Were we otherwise okay? They handed us water bottles with pictures of mountains on them. At one point, a whole bunch of Brown women came into the ward, took one look at us, and bawled like babies. 'Social Services,' a nurse snarled under her breath. 'Don't let them take your candy bars, girls. Here, have some more on the ward.' The Brown women whipped out clipboards, scribbled, wiped their cheeks, scribbled some more.

They stopped every few minutes to look at us. 'What happened, babies? Didn't you know the world was looking for you all this time?" First, I'd like to thank my family for making *Dear Miss Metropolitan* possible. The way I'm going to answer to the question is as follows, where do we find ourselves now, today, yesterday, tomorrow? Wars, sickness, exploitation, silencing, suffering. Who is safe? Who, in danger? Who is seen? Who is ignored? How do we care for those far away from us? Why should we feel their pain? How far will our empathy reach?

Questions like these follow us in our daily world but have actually always accompanied me in my writing. I began *Dear Miss Metropolitan* in 2013, shortly after reading about the discovery of three young women who had been kidnapped and held captive for 10 years in a suburban home in Cleveland, Ohio. The news of their liberation, while stunning, was also devastating. "How could these girls go missing for so long," I wondered? "How could they be overlooked, misplaced, forgotten, and for weeks, months, years?"

The erasure of these young women sparked a grim inspiration in me as a writer and led to hard truths about the intersections of race, gender, and violence as they play out in the lives of girls and women. Most prominently, in the lives of girls and women of color. The Black and Missing Foundation based in Hyattsville, Maryland, and led by the extraordinary Derrica Wilson and Natalie Wilson, makes the point that while thousands of people are reported missing in the US every year, the disappearance of Brown and Black people goes largely unreported in the news media.

A government statistic points out that nearly 40% of the missing persons are persons of color, even though African Americans make up only 13% of the population. The Women's Media Center observes that African American girls make up over 40% of the missing children in America, and yet, as many of us are aware, these girls are largely absent from the collective outrage. They are pigeon-holed as runaways or juvenile delinquents. They're deemed disposable, often by the systems that are meant to protect them. They are erased.

What do we see when we see a Black girl on a missing poster and we walk on by?

Do we see anything at all? Shootings are televised now, wars are featured on social media. Often, there is a kind of barrier that almost shields us, the viewer, from the violence and atrocities taking place close to us, but also taking place halfway around the world. We can't be desensitized to the sufferings of others, we must be compelled as artists, humanitarians, writers, to make the stories of those who have been overlooked or erased, known and felt. After showing an early draft of *Dear Miss Metropolitan* to an editor, I was told that the book was too dark, too hopeless for readers, but what ran inside of me was not a feeling of resignation, but a sense of urgency.

The stories of these Black and Brown girls are urgent and necessary, and, if I channel Joseph Conrad's famous exhortation, their stories need to be heard, they need to be felt, they need to be seen. That and no more, and it is everything. I could not shy away. I thank my publisher, Henry Holt, for not shying away. I thank my editor, Retha Powers, for embracing the characters of Fern, Gwinnie, and Jesenia, and not shying away. I think my agent, Lisa Bankoff, for finding their stories compelling and worthwhile, and not shying away. I remember thinking my Black and Brown girl characters will not just survive, they will flourish.

Yes, I was thinking of them, but I was also thinking about my reader. When I write, I think about the very things PEN/America stands for. Empathy, freedom, and diversity. To be honored tonight by the PEN/Faulkner Foundation is a privilege that will forever resound in my heart and soul. I'm guided by Faulkner's advice to the writer that once the character is in your mind, he is right and he is true, and then he does the work by himself. You've got to know your character, you've got to believe in him, you've got to feel that he is alive.

Dear Miss Metropolitan is a story about community, many communities. The ones that you were born into, and the ones that you create out of necessity. Communities of survivors, of mothers, of sisters unrelated by blood, of observers, of doers, of imaginers. What do all these communities, in the end, owe each other? We can't look away. In an HBO documentary on the Black and Missing Foundation, Natalie and Derrica riff on the following question, how can Black people meet the criteria for sympathy and action if their stories aren't newsworthy?

Dear Miss Metropolitan was my attempt to add to the imaginative coverage of those lives. I'm deeply grateful to the PEN/Faulkner judges, to my fellow finalists, and to the organization itself for considering those Black and Brown lives worthy, and utterly essential. Thank you.

Jessica: Please welcome 2022 PEN/Faulkner award judge Rebecca Makkai.

[music]

Rebecca: *How Beautiful We Were* begins with one of the most riveting fictional scenes in recent memory, a standoff between messengers of the American petroleum company that has ravaged a small West African community, and the village madman who has taken the

key to their car, and thus their only route of escape. It's a scene that beautifully highlights, imbalances and triangulations of power. It serves as a microcosm of the larger narrative. One in which individuals use all they can to fight faceless and conscienceless forces. Rarely, are the tools at their disposal enough, and yet, sometimes remarkably, they make seismic difference.

This is also a novel about generations. Not only the gaps between them but the collective consciousness of a particular group of age mates, which Imbolo Mbue renders in stunning chorus throughout. It is also a story about a move between two vastly different worlds, as our central protagonist, Thula, faces and adapts to an American world, perhaps familiar to many readers, but revealed in all its strangeness through her eyes. To this panel of judges, all three of us, the American children of immigrant parents, the stunning complexity of the theme of migration was particularly noted and appreciated.

Rather than a one-way ticket, it is rendered here as the push and pull between old and new, between reinvention and return, that is so often its reality. At a time in literary history when most climate fiction is a warning story about a potential and often unrecognizable future, this novel gives us an apocalyptic and very real past and present. In the village of Kosawa, the ravages of human greed have already overwhelmed the land and its people. Beauty and peace are already memories. This is a novel that shakes us and wakes us, not because it asks us to imagine the future, but because it demands that we remember the past.

"In our perpetual poll between these two," as Mbue writes, "the past always wins because what it says is true." Tonight, we honor the truth and excellence of a stunning novel from a master of the form. Please welcome 2017 PEN/Faulkner Winner, and 2022 PEN/Faulkner Finalist, Imbolo Mbue

Imbolo Mbue: Thank you so much, Rebecca. Thank you, everybody. Thank you, Eugenia. Thank you, Rion. Rebecca's introduction just got me all choked up. I'm thinking, "Wow, that was so beautiful." Thank you. I'm very touched. I am very humble because five years ago I was in this similar position. My first novel, my debut novel on PEN/Faulkner for Fiction, and here I am again. I am very grateful to the organization and humbled to be in the company of my fellow finalist and the winner. I am going to read the beginning.

Since Rebecca mentioned the beginning, I'm going to read the beginning of my novel, *How Beautiful We Were*, which is a scene in which you get introduced to this village, and you realize that the village had been very heavily polluted and the villagers are trying to see what they can do to fight this American oil company. "We should have known the end was near.

How could we not have known? When the sky began to pour acid and rivers began to turn green, we should have known our land would soon be dead. Then again, how could we not have known? When we began to wobble and stagger, stumbling and snapping like feeble little branches, they told us it would soon be over. That we would all be well in no time.

They asked us to come to village meeting to talk about it. They told us we had to trust them. We should have spat in their faces, heaped upon them names most befitting; liars, savages, unscrupulous, evil.

We should have cursed their mothers and their grandmothers. Flung pejoratives upon their fathers, prayed for unspeakable calamities before their children. We hated them, and we hated their meetings, but we attended all of them. Every eight weeks, we went to the village square to listen to them. We were dying, we were helpless, we were afraid. Those meetings were our only chance at salvation. We run home from school on the appointed days, eager to complete our chores so we would miss not one word at the assembly. We fetched water from the well, chased goats and chicken around our compound into bamboo barns. Swept away leaves and twigs scattered across our front yards.

We washed iron pots and piles of bowls after dinner. We left our huts many minutes before the meeting was called for. We wanted to get there before they strolled into the village square in their fine suits and polished shoes. Our mothers hurried to the square too, as did our fathers. They left their work unfinished in the forest beyond the big river, their palms and bare feet dusted with poisoned earth. 'The work will be there waiting for us tomorrow,' our father said to us. 'We will only have so many opportunities to hear what the men from Pexton have to say.'

Even when their bodies bore little strength after hours of toiling beneath the sun, both benevolent and cruel, they went to the meetings because we all had to be at the meeting. The only person who did not attend the meeting was Konga, our village madman. Konga, who had no awareness of our suffering and lived without fear of what was and what was to come. He slept in the school compound as we hurried along, snoring and slobbering if he wasn't tossing, itching, muttering, eyes closed. Trapped as he was, alone in a world in which spirits ruled and men were powerless under their dominion, he knew nothing about Pexton.

In the square we sat in near silence as the sun left us for the day, oblivious to how the beauty of its descent heightened our anguish. We watched as the Pexton men placed their briefcases on the table our village head had set for them. They were always three of them. We called them the Round One, the Sick One, and the Leader. We mumbled among ourselves as they opened their briefcases and passed sheets of paper among themselves, covering their mouths as they whispered into each other's ears to ensure they had their lies straight.

We had nowhere more important to be, so we waited, desperate for good news. We whispered at intervals, wondering what they were thinking whenever they paused to look at us, at our grandfathers and fathers on stools up front, those with dead or dying children in the first row. Our grandmothers and mothers behind them, nursing babies into quietude and shooting us glares if we made the wrong sound from under the mango tree. Our young women repeatedly sighed and shook their heads. Our young men clustered at the back, stood clench-jawed and seething.

We inhaled, waited, exhaled. We remembered those who had died from diseases with neither names nor cures. Our siblings, and cousins, and friends who had perished from the poison in the water, and the poison in the air, and the poison food growing from the land that lost its purity the day Pexton came drilling. We hoped the men from Pexton would look into our eyes and feel something for us. We were children, like their children. We wanted them to recognize that. If they did, it wasn't apparent in their countenance. They'd come for Pexton, to keep its conscious clean. They hadn't come for us."

Again, I'd like to thank everybody. This novel is a novel that I wrote over a period of 17 years. It took a lot of support. My wonderful team at Random House, my wonderful agents at Writers House, my other agents at Lyceum, and my amazing family and my friends all supported me very much. PEN/Faulkner also supported me because when I was winning the PEN/Faulkner for my first novel, I was already writing this novel. That encouragement that I had written my first novel, got that award, it definitely gave me the confidence to go back and finish the novel I had started.

I began writing this novel because, as a child, I was very curious about people who stood up against power. I grew up in Africa in the '90s, and it was a time at which revolutionaries were very celebrated. I grew up at the time when we had great African revolutionaries, like Thomas Sankara, Patrick Lumumba, and Nelson Mandela. I was very curious about the lives of these people. What went on behind the scenes whenever there was this fight for justice. I came to America, and I learned about the Civil Rights Movement.

I learned about the Women's Rights Movement and the Gay Rights Movement, and environmental justice, which, this book is very much about environmental justice. I became very, very fascinated about the price people pay for justice. I spent many years writing this, and it was a very, very, very painful process several times, but I'm glad I stuck with it, and I am very, very grateful again to PEN/Faulkner. I don't know how often it happens that somebody's first and second book are both recognized by this wonderful organization, but it means the world to me.

Hopefully, my next book doesn't take me 1 million years to write because it is not fun to spend so many years writing one book. I am most grateful and thank everybody so much. Thank you, goes to the audience also because, without the readers, it would not be as much fun writing. I am very grateful for everybody who has read my work and who continues to encourage me to write. Thank you, guys, again.

Jessica: Please welcome 2022 PEN/Faulkner award judge Rebecca Makkai.

[music]

Rebecca: Impassioned and remarkably constructed, Rabih Alameddine's sixth novel *The Wrong End of the Telescope* takes us into the world of a transgender Lebanese American doctor, Mina, working in Lesbos at a refugee camp for Syrians. This is though, fundamentally, both a collective and a collected story as our lens focuses, in turn, on those

refugees and their lives. On Mina herself, on the volunteers who are often there for their own emotional and social gains. On Mina's unnamed writer friend, who, though a veteran collector of refugee stories, is overwhelmed and emotionally paralyzed by his experiences in Lesbos.

"Empathy is overrated," claims this demoralized writer, who has taken his own empathy to the limits, absorbing the narratives of so many desperate souls that he knows how fruitless compassion can be in the shadows of global forces. Yet in this novel, as in life, imperfect and inadequate stories are the best and perhaps the only ways to understand another human. The writer, being a writer, has no choice but to take the plunge. Putting no moral gloss on its subjects and infused with both the gravitas and the humor of a fittingly Greek mythos, this novel explores the complexities of refugee lives and the intricacies of Mina's relationships.

In the juxtaposition and accumulation of short chapters that could often stand alone as individual masterpieces, Alameddine brings a success out of the very failures inherent in a narrative. In so doing, he examines multiple angles of a timely and vital subject and probes the life-changing choices humans are forced to make, as well as the ways we seek refuge, both from geopolitical disruptions and from our own patterns of life. The novel's exquisite language draws no attention to itself, instead, suspending time and letting the reader float weightless through this world.

Key to the structure of the book is the fact that Alameddine makes brilliant use of first, second, and third-person narration. Mina's intimate first-person accounting takes advantage of everything that mode can offer. Her second-person address to the nameless writer is a strikingly original move. The third-person accounts of refugee and volunteer lives exemplify the very uses and limits of empathy that the novel seeks to trace. In a year of stunning and important fiction, this work stands as a particular achievement. A novel that cries out to be heard, and that teaches us, both intrinsically and intrinsically, what story can do.

We are honored and delighted to introduce the winner of this year's PEN/Faulkner award, Rabih Alameddine.

Rabih Alameddine: Thank you so much. I promise myself I wouldn't cry, but you almost had me. Thank you. Thank you. Truly, I am overwhelmed. Words fail me. Instead of thanking everybody, the judges, let me thank independent booksellers, I would not have a career without independent booksellers. I assume all the other finalists feel the same way. Please support your independent booksellers. Let me read a little bit from my novel. *The Little Rascals Go to Camp.* "I dreamt of my mother, of my father, of sitting before them as an adult, all of us underwater in the Mediterranean.

Something like that, everything fleeting and hollow. I heard strange knocking noises as if I were in an aquarium with some child knocking on the glass, my head echoing back. Indeed it was a child who woke me, or rather five of them. Four boys and a little girl, all in clothes

that had seen better days if they'd ever had a good one. The kids stepped back from the car as soon as I turned, all of them giggling. I'd slept for hours, my head leaning against the rear window. I stretched my arms, used the car's roof as support, which made the children laugh louder.

I got out of the car, asking them in Arabic if there was something wrong or if they found me generally amusing. The eldest boy, no more than eleven, clad in a multi-darned sweater, explained that I was snoring loudly. He could hear my snoring through the car window, he said, but not his friend and lieutenant, pointing to a younger boy, because his ears were filthy. His ears had so much dirt, the eldest boy said, that you could grow wheat in them and make bread. The other boy, whose ears did not seem any dirtier than the rest, was not amused.

The children asked me where I was from, then introduced themselves. The leader, his lieutenant, and another boy were from the Aleppo area. The fourth boy was all the way from Pakistan and didn't speak Arabic, but he was fun nonetheless. The blonde girl clad in strident colors was from Iraq and didn't say much because she was shy, but she had to be in the club because the leader's mother would beat him up if he didn't allow girls. What did their club do? Well, it was formed only that morning, so their objectives were not entirely clear yet, but the main reason for the club's existence was mischief-making.

As in, his mother told him to take his friends and make trouble for other people, not her if he knew what was best for him. Of course, he knew. Could they take me into the camp to meet my friend? Of course, they could, and not only that, they would explain things to me since I was obviously new, but it was going to cost me. No, not money, but a whole chocolate bar, or two since they were five of them. Of course, they knew I didn't have chocolate on me. I didn't even have a purse, but I could buy candy at one of the cantinas over there, the boys said.

The big one facing the gate had the best chocolate. The owners had given them two bars that morning for picking up all the paper cups and putting them in a garbage bag. Had I ever had coffee out of a paper cup? It was hours ago since they had chocolate. They were five and it was only two bars, and they could tell me all kinds of things about Moria. The camp to my right, not the city in *The Lord of the Rings*, but they could even explain the movie to me if I wanted. I should buy them chocolate bars. Of course, I should."

To answer the question, why is the story you've told of unique significance in the present moment, every writer hopes that her work is significant in the present moment, as well as in every present moment to come. Why limit yourself, is what I say. The writer hopes that the reader finds the story significant whether it is now, a month from now, a year from now, or 50 years down the line. A writer wants the novel to be both topical and to transcend its topicality. *Wrong End of the Telescope* deals with refugees, specifically Syrian refugees. I went to Lesbos in January of 2006 to observe what was happening, to witness.

I'd expected to see a lot of Syrians. What surprised me was how diverse the refugee population was. There was a substantial number of refugees from as far away as East Asia, from Malaysia and Bangladesh, from Sub Saharan Africa, Mali, and Congo, and from every country in the Middle East. Men, women, children, families, unaccompanied minors, everybody was there, and each, with his or her story. Unfortunately, I can't see the refugee situation getting any better, and now, with the toxic war in Ukraine, millions of Ukrainians have become refugees. I believe 5.5 million have left the country, and about 7 million were displaced internally. That's just a drop in the bucket of the worldwide refugee populations. *The Wrong End of the Telescope* attempts to look at how individuals, regular people, deal with such a problem. How can a person help? I still don't know the answer, but then at my age, I've come to realize that I don't know any answers. Really, I thought I had answers when I was younger, but all my answers turned out to be wrong, amazingly. Really, I know nothing, which is probably why this story is significant in the present moment.

Who knows anything anymore? Thank you so, so much for this award. Again, I am overwhelmed, and I promised not to cry, so I won't. Thank you.

[music]

Maureen: Congratulations, everyone. Thank you to this year's spectacular authors, and to the PEN/Faulkner judges who selected them. Those dedicated judges, all three of them wonderful writers themselves, read and considered more than 500 books to find the few we honored tonight. I hope everyone watching tonight reads all five of them. They'll surely reward the attention you give them, but before you go off and do that, let's have one last word tonight from PEN/Faulkner's Executive Director Gwydion Suilebhan.

Gwydion: Thank you, Maureen, for being our wonderful, wonderful MC tonight. I also want to thank Jessica Hansen who provided tonight's voiceover narration. Shahenda Helmy our Director of Literary Programs, for her leadership in planning this event, and Dolen Perkins-Valdez, our Board Chair, for stepping in to support us today at the 11th hour. I'm also grateful to you for joining us. You've given our writers the gift of your attention, as Maureen just mentioned, and that is what literature is all about. You devote your attention to a book, and you're repaid with discovery, and delight, and so many things.

That is the sort of literary experience we are trying to give everyone, particularly students who attend low-income schools in DC. We could not do that without your support. I'm asking you, I hope that before you sign off you'll consider a donation to support that work. I want to share my immense gratitude for our co-chairs, Mary and Robert Haft, and Katherine Boone, and Joshua Geltzer. For decades, Mary Haft has been a visionary leader in support of our organization. None of what you have seen here tonight would have been possible without her.

Katherine Boone is a newer PEN/Faulkner board member, but she's already made a significant difference by helping to guide our education programs during a challenging

time. Finally, I have to offer my sincere thanks to all of our sponsors and friends whose names you'll see on screen in just a moment. You all are the heart and soul of PEN/Faulkner. You have lifted us up this year, and I thank you. Goodnight, everyone, and Eid Mubarak to all who celebrate. We'll see you again soon.