

## 2022 PEN/Malamud Award Ceremony ft. Yiyun Li

December 2, 2022

**Stephanie Grant:** Good evening. My name is Stephanie Grant, and I'm lucky enough to direct the MFA program in creative writing here at American University. I am thrilled to welcome you tonight to welcome you all in person. It's a great privilege and a joy to be able to do. I invite you to settle in. I invite you to silence your phones and things that go beep, now is the moment, so that together we can spend a precious hour celebrating the short story. When my colleague Dolen Perkins-Valdez proposed that we collaborate with the PEN/Faulkner Foundation to host the PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story. I said yes immediately.

I said yes not simply because I always say yes to Dolen, who is as wise as she is talented, but because we both knew instinctively that our program was the perfect platform for the PEN/Malamud Award. Writing programs generally and AU's writing program in particular revere the short story as the publishing industry so often does not. As a literary form, the short story is prized for its compression and lyricism. Its keen attention to moments of being. It is understood in writerly circles to be more akin to poetry than to the novel. It is seen as the prose equivalent of a brilliantly executed dive from the highest of high diving boards. All torque, no splash.

Here at AU, we revere the form not because it offers lessons about how to live but because it illuminates sometimes plainly humbly, at other times extravagantly richly. In both instances of course I'm thinking about the work of Yiyun Li whom we have gathered to celebrate tonight. The short story illuminates life as we experience it, embodied, fleeting, imperfect. Before I turn the mic over to Dolen, I want to introduce if a bit in advance of her appearance another brilliant colleague Patricia Park who will be interviewing Yiyun Li after her reading.

Patricia Park is an award-winning novelist and essayist whose second novel and first young adult novel, *Imposter Syndrome and Other Confessions of Alejandra Kim*, is being brought out to great fanfare next February by Penguin Random House, but first things first, please welcome the chair of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation, my colleague the novelist Dolen Perkins-Valdez.

**Dolen Perkins-Valdez:** Now that I know Stephanie says yes to everything, I got some questions for the director of the program about my schedule. No, I'm just kidding. I love working with Stephanie. Thank you. Welcome to the PEN/Malamud Award. I'm going to tell you a little bit about the award, and then I will turn the program over. Awarded annually to writers who have demonstrated exceptional achievement in the short story form. The PEN/Malamud Award is one of the nation's most significant literary prizes for the short story form.

The winner is selected by members of the PEN/Faulkner board of directors who rely on their knowledge of the industry and recommendations from a small advisory board that includes the luminaries such as Edward P. Jones, Deborah Eisenberg, Stuart Dybek, Amina Gautier, and Lorrie Moore. The fund for the award was established by a generous gift from Bernard Malamud's family and continues to grow

through the generosity of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation supporters. Bernard Malamud was a giant in the world of letters, winning the National Book Award twice, the Pulitzer Prize, and a lifetime achievement from the National Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

His published works include *The Magic Barrel* and *The Fixer*. If you have not read Bernard Malamud's work, I really highly recommend it. I want to also give one moment of a shout-out before I continue to Deborah Tannen, who has chaired the PEN/Malamud committee for years and recently turned those reins over to me and who has been a really wonderful steward of this award. Deborah could you stand for just a moment? She's also very famous Georgetown University linguist and professor but also just a real steward of this award.

Over the years, Deborah has helped us actually maintain a very close relationship with the Malamud family, including his daughter Janna Malamud Smith, his son Paul Malamud, and his grandchildren. In October of this year, we were saddened to learn that Paul Malamud, Bernard Malamud's son passed away. Paul received a PhD from Columbia University and served in the US Department of State for over 30 years. He was widely traveled, well-read, and a poet as well as a translator of poetry. We here at PEN/Faulkner remember him fondly and we offer our deepest condolences to the family. Thank you everyone for supporting this very important award.

**Louis:** Good evening. My name is Louis Bayard. I'm on the PEN/Faulkner board as well, the chairman of the PEN/Faulkner Awards. It's great to have everyone in person. This is so wonderful. It's been three years. Three years since we've all gathered in person, so this is delightful. Over the course of her still young career, Yiyun Li has published 10 books and received honors ranging from the Whiting Award to the Guggenheim and MacArthur Fellowships. I should add she was also a finalist for the 2020 PEN/Faulkner Award for her exquisitely moving *Where Reasons End*. We choose tonight to honor her mastery of the short story which showcases her gifts in their most distilled and concentrated form.

For a writer coming so late in life to the English language, it'd be accomplishment enough to have mastered it as she has in all its expressive possibilities. Li's body of short fiction is something more, a series of windows and hidden lives that taken together form an indelible artistic bridge between her native and adopted lands. Yuyin began her career as a scientist studying T-cells and B-cells under a microscope. It's tempting to say she brings the same exactitude to her characters, but there's something else at play, I think, an acceptance of a relish of human behavior in all its variations. For me, the writer she puts me most in mind of is another PEN/Malamud recipient Alice Monroe.

With both authors, we sense that the story before us has been not so much crafted, though obviously an extraordinary amount of craft has gone into it but discovered unearthed. We bring an implicit faith to every line because we feel that life itself is unfolding before us. This is a rare enough quality that we owe it to ourselves to celebrate it whenever we come across it. I hope you'll join me now in welcoming the extraordinary Yiyun Li.

**Yiyun Li:** Good evening. Thank you so much for that wonderful introduction and thank you American University and PEN/Faulkner Foundation and the

**[unintelligible 00:08:23]** Committee to award this to me. If you haven't read the complete story Bernard Malamud, it's a tome of stories I often read. On the train here I read a couple of his early stories and then I read one of the last stories, In the Kew Garden which is about Virginia Woolf. Because of the time, I want to read a complete short story. I'm going to read a short story that is quite like his later work. The title of the story is The Reason Why.

"Why are the parents of these children never around?" I asked my writing class during the discussion of a story in which a set of teenagers seemed to live in a dome established entirely for their adolescent existence. The characters, homogenous in their demeanor and desire, reminded me of those mice I used to conduct research on in a science lab: they arrived, six in a cage, and were sacrificed at exactly eight weeks old. "Sacrifice" is a misnomer; there was little to be called sacred in their lives. A student said, Professor, you must understand that, at our age, parents don't exist for our characters." I laughed. He was right in a way.

A while ago, when my family checked into a flat at the center of Edinburgh, my elder son said, "If only I were here with my friends, not you guys." "Excuse me," I said. "Would you rather holiday with your friends or with grandma?" he said. "Touché," I said. It was the last summer we traveled together. Unlike on our previous trips, he took many selfies with me. "Aren't you happy that I'm not as mean to you as a year ago?" he said several times. Earlier that summer his best friend had said that she'd found him changed. They were in Tibet together, lying next to a river and looking at the stars. "She said I was more settled," he told me.

The way he described the moment made me believe that they would both remember it forever. At the end of the summer, he turned sixteen and then died. "Do you know, in New Zealand, two friends killed the mother of one of them? Someone made a movie out of it." It was thirty years ago when Xian told me about the girls in New Zealand. We were 15 then, in a world that seemed complete without adults; occasionally we allowed other classmates into our world, but they were only guests, and we were not often hospitable. "Yes?" I said. I didn't know where the conversation was leading us. I rarely did in those days.

Xian said that there was something ominous about those two girls. "You know, we could easily be them." I was shocked, but I took it as one of those shocking statements Xian liked to make. "Have you ever wondered what to do if someone raped you? We would have to pretend it's only a bad experience with a wrong boyfriend." We were not murderers. Xian didn't take anything seriously enough to want to eliminate anyone. I was a model student, with pleasing qualities that other parents wished their children possessed. Years later, I listened to a radio program. Two teenage girls played truant one day, took a walk out of their Midwest town, and eventually lay down on a train track.

After a long conversation they fell asleep, only to wake up to the rest of their lives: a train ran over them, and four legs were lost between the two girls. I shivered when I listened to the girls on the program. They said they had not intended to do anything, though not many people would believe them. They had only been talking, and then dozed off. One girl said, "No one will ever understand us as we understand each other." That, I realized, was Xian's fear - that we had marked ourselves in a way beyond the insipid words of hate or love, affection or loyalty.

Such a thing can happen during adolescence, and like sleep, it takes hostage of one's consciousness before one is aware, and if one wakes up again - as one is bound to - something is missing. Irretrievably and irreplaceably: that's what forever is. "Why are you not writing?" For many years Xian had asked me, starting when we were 15. Her questions were baffling, as I had never wanted to be a writer. "What should I write about?" I would ask. "Anything," she would reply, and once, she said, "Cannibals." "Why cannibals?" I asked. "Because I read a story about cannibals in a magazine. Some tribe roasting and feasting on another tribe. It's fiction but not well written. I thought you could do better than that."

I did not ask her where she read the cannibal story. It would be like asking her where she had heard about the murderesses in New Zealand. This was long before internet - this was when neither of us even had access to the high school library. How did she learn so much about the world? I do not remember if it baffled me. I was malleable then, but not curious. The high school library would soon open its door to us - to me, to be precise. For the first year of high school, I had worked studiously; with perfect scores, I was one of the few chosen students to be granted the privilege of using the library. Others would only be allowed into the reading room, where most books were academically oriented.

I had toiled through several of the mathematics and physics books, the best among them written by the Soviets and the Romanians. Xian read the card catalog, and I walked between the shelves with stacks of borrowing requests. In this way, we had found the writers we would read together: Romain Rolland, Albert Camus, Françoise Sagan, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. There were long afternoons on Saturdays when we took turns to read aloud chapters from *The Tale of Genji* to each other, and then *Tender Is the Night*, *The Garden of Eden*.

The last had converted us into dedicated readers of Hemingway, and we read *The Nick Adams Stories*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and other Hemingway novels. Our favorite story was called "The Last Good Country." When I say our favorite, I mean Xian's favorite. I did not often have opinions then. Then we discovered D. H. Lawrence. Sometimes we read side by side, sometimes to each other: *Sons and Lovers*, *Women in Love*, *The Rainbow*. At an age when everything feels permeable, one friend's obsession easily becomes another's, and obsession can lead even a malleable person to strong opinions.

For a while we argued about two Lawrence stories, pitching them against each other as two gladiators, as though in our world only one of them should be allowed to exist. The two stories: my choice was "The Princess," Xian's, "The Fox." In each story a character is killed: a man who seems to have every right to live but is shot dead after he is thought to have abducted and raped the Princess; a woman whose death is wished for by another character - a man who is in love with her best friend - and is made to happen by the story. Xian did not like the dramatic change of the Princess after a mere sexual encounter with the man.

"The Princess asked him to make love to her and then decided that she did not like it," Xian said; she did not have to like it, but there was no need for her to pretend that her entire being was shattered. I opposed the perfunctory death of the woman in "The Fox," which does not turn her from an essential character into an extraneous one: death is but only a convenient solution. Lawrence was the first writer who made

life make sense to us. Or, a more precise way to say it is: Lawrence admitted us into a world more extraordinary than our sensible one.

We were living, I now know, in a puritan society then, but Lawrence gave us tortuous riddles and distorting rituals, men and women that we wanted to be our own makings. In possessing us, he granted us possessions: unexperienced desires and wonderments, unwarranted griefs and disillusion. "Why are you not writing?" Xian still asked me in high school and, later, when we were in college. "What should I write about?" "Strange people, weird happenings," she said. "A fox with a pair of wings. A sun frozen in midair. Anything you can make up." "I don't want to write," I said. "Why don't you yourself write?" "I'm not disciplined," she said. "That's why."

I would not call myself disciplined. I was only malleable, and for the longest time, I considered that a reliable strength of mine. Malleability would never make an interesting person, but it did give me an achievable goal: I wanted a life as solid as a Chekhov story. I didn't mind being called conventional. Or stolid. Or nondescript. A disciple of Chekhov thinks little of those adjectives. It made me proud, even, to think of myself being as beguiling as a Chekhovian character. Then, imagine this: one day that character wakes up and finds herself in a Shakespeare play. O, the horror of being in the wrong story. Ask Constance. Ask Lear. Ask me.

The girls in New Zealand would do well in a Lawrence story or a Shakespeare play. The girls who lost their legs, too. Xian and I - or who we once - could have become one of those pairs. What saved, or diverted, us? She had thought if one of us could become a writer, the extraordinary would be corralled into stories; I had thought that if I rushed into an ordinary life, I would be free. After I gave birth to my elder son, Xian called. "In no time you will make yourself into a perfect suburban housewife and mother," she said. "I don't see why that is a problem," I said. "You could've chosen differently." "Like what?" I said. "Like writing," she said. Where were the ambition and the wildness we once shared?

I didn't know if I was ever ambitious. I was not wild. Or even young. I was in a hurry to become an adult. To be old as soon as possible, so I could stop being young. Domesticated, Xian had said of me in that phone call. After that, we faded from each other's life. A few months before my elder son's death, Xian had called me out of the blue. "So, you have become a writer," she said. "Yes," I said. "No offense, but I haven't read any of your books," Xian said. I said that I didn't imagine she would like what I wrote. "In fact, I don't read fiction anymore," she said. The statement, more tragic than all Shakespearean tragedies combined, shook me. "What do you read then?" I asked.

"Not much," she said. "Reading requires discipline, and you know I'm not disciplined." My elder son and his best friend next to the Tibetan river: they were young then. "I was your age once," this was one of the last things I said to him. Yet that didn't save him. I spent my youth hurrying into adulthood. Unlike me, he would have taken his time to become a Chekhovian character, if at all. Before that, he would have all the Shakespearean passions to live through, and many, in Shakespeare's plays, do not flinch when they take their own lives. Nothing is more fatal than being young. Not all survive, but those who do, they wake up and find something missing, irretrievably and irreplaceably.

Then they earned that word - forever - which even the most brilliant young minds misunderstand. "Why are you not writing?" Xian asked. Perhaps what she said, all those years ago, was this: "You will, one day, because I have said so, and that's why." Thank you.

**[pause 00:25:20]**

**Patricia Park:** Hi, Yiyun. [chuckles]

**Yiyun:** [unintelligible 00:25:46]

**Patricia:** Hi. Congratulations on your award.

**Yiyun:** Thank you very much. Thank you.

**Patricia:** Yes, right? I want to talk with you today about the short story first.

**Yiyun:** Thank you so much.

**Patricia:** You and I will talk, and then we'll take a couple of questions from the audience. It's so crazy, believe it or not, I used to be Anne Perry's publicist back in the day, the New Zealand teens that were referenced in the story.

**Yiyun:** Oh, wow. Okay.

**Patricia:** I want to talk about-- I know, right? I know. I'm like [unintelligible 00:26:26] Yes, I worked on her Christmas mysteries, the murder mysteries, but a whole other conversation to peg. I want to talk to you about how you shape and structure a story. The reason why, you have these pieces from the present and the past, the students in the workshop, the death of the narrator's son, the friendship with Xian, the childhood friend, the two girls on the train tracks, the act of reading, the act of writing. How do you take these seemingly disparate parts and massage them into a story form?

**Yiyun:** "Massage." I like that word "massage." I think one reason I love short stories so much is-- I think when I was a younger or aspiring writer, people often say to me, I think some students would have heard of this, say, a story, a short story is a slice of life or a glimpse of life, and I rebel against that. I think a short story should be as epic as a novel. A short story is about the life, as a novel is about the life. My approach to writing stories is, I think when you said, "How do you shape these things?" I think life is multi-layered. I often tell my students, "you live in multiple moments at the same time. They could be listening to me in a classroom, but they could be also living in a childhood memory.

They could also be imagining their future, so it's multiple moments collapsed into one moment. I think a short story, in a way, writing a short story is to find those different lives in different moments like the narrator as a 15-year-old, and the narrator's son as a 16-year-old, that, as you said, they're scattered into the world, but you want to just bring them in.

I think, in a way, just put them-- It's very hard to explain how you write a story. I think it's an arrangement of words. You just leave those things next to each other, but they

talk to each other, the boy talks to the girl, the two New Zealand girls, and the two Chinese girls, and the two girls from Midwest.

Once you lay them next to or you place them next to each other, they talk with each other. I think writing short stories just to find a way to have those multiple moments to talk to each other.

**Patricia:** I love that. I think as the story was unfolding, as we were listening to you read, the layers would emerge, and the juxtaposition of them, we just kept digging more and getting another layer. How do you know what to put in or leave out? Why aren't there more layers, Yiyun? Then how do you know what to put in, leave out, so that it does still feel like a story?

**Yiyun:** How do I know? I don't know. [chuckles] I guess the easiest answer is I don't quite know, but it's an instinct, it's an intuition. I hate to go back to that cliché, the tip of the iceberg, but it is a tip of the iceberg. I think the thing is, one thing that I think is important is, stories are lives lived. It's not me the author who create these characters. The characters are not produced by me or created by me or developed by me. I think the characters have their lives. I think my job as an author, as a storyteller, is to capture moments of their lives. There are always things left out inevitably because these are people living their lives.

I think the key is just to capture or to catch the key moments. I like short stories because you don't have to say everything, you don't have to put everything in. As long as you say a few words, it's enough.

**Patricia:** That balancing act and yet still making it feel epic and scope, you do it so masterfully, Yiyun.

**Yiyun:** Thank you. It's very hard to answer questions.

**Patricia:** I feel like I'm putting you in the hot seat, but I didn't have a choice here.

**Yiyun:** It's hard to explain how you do things.

**Patricia:** What you're talking about instinct, I read that you read 5 to 10 hours a day. I would imagine that quote-unquote, "instinct," is actually just the **[unintelligible 00:31:26]** 10,000 hours and then some of absorbing stories. You hear that students, 5 to 10 hours a day. I would imagine a lot of it comes from your dedicated practice. One of your characters once said "Writing fiction is to eavesdrop on your characters' hearts." I really love that.

One of your students quoted you as saying, "The relationship between your characters is the heart of the story." Can you talk about how you come to your characters? You said you didn't create them, they come to you, you share their stories and what I love is how they come from all parts and all walks of life. You have a Chairman Mao impersonator, you have a Peking opera singer turn-boy prostitute and his two lovers. A counter-revolutionary on death row. I can keep going on, but can you tell us about how you eavesdrop on your characters?

**Yiyun:** Yes, I do. Louis said characters are discovered, and I think that's exactly right. Characters live out there, and my job is to discover them and then to

eavesdrop on them. On a very basic level, I eavesdrop on people all the time. It's a very convenient time at this moment to eavesdrop on people. One time I was walking down the street. There was a little undergrad in front of me, this was on the west coast, and she was wearing a very short skirt, very scantily dressed. She was talking to her friend, so I just followed her. On the phone, she said, "No, no, bo, I told him I'm not ready to go there with him because I'm still considering to become a nun." When you've heard that you just have to follow her.

**Patricia:** Did you follow her to the convent from there?

**Yiyun:** I followed her across campus, I think. I think it's things you hear in life or things you read in newspapers that don't make sense. I think I write out of bafflement because people are so strange I can never understand them, and I think my writing stories is just to find out why they are so strange, why I cannot understand them. By the end of the story, I still don't understand them, but I think I know them a little better. I know them by one gesture or one phrase they use. I think that to me is as close as you can get to another person. In life we see people all the time, people put on their facade, people put on an appearance. Characters do that too.

I don't think characters like to reveal their secrets to us, characters want to be read as they want to be read. It's sort of my job to say, no I need to write around your protection, I need to write around your mask to find out who you really are. Yes, eavesdrop people's hearts. I once did a presentation on the whole concept of eavesdropping, comes from the roof, under the roof. The space is called eavesdrop, if you stand there you don't get wet when you listen to what's going on inside the house. That's the word, how the word eavesdrop came into language.

In Victorian England, eavesdrop was a crime. You could be sentenced to prison term if you eavesdrop on someone. In Chinese eavesdrop, the word is still listen, and also in some Scandinavian languages, always has that steal-- When you eavesdrop on people you are stealing from people and you are taking something from the character. I think writing in a way is also intrusive. You are taking things from the characters they may not want to share with you but you just have to do it.

**Patricia:** You steal them.

**Yiyun:** You steal them, you eavesdrop and you try not to get wet.

**Patricia:** I read that you were a big studier of etymology too and that you have multiple dictionaries on your desk and you reach for them and you can probably break down the etymology of any word that we throw at you. I want to talk about your story "Extra." You all remember it from *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. You set up certain expectations in that story. Quick recap, Granny Lin in that story, at the opening she's been honorably retired from her job, which means she gets no pension.

Immediately from the story, I remember feeling the sense of doom for Granny Lin, like, "Oh, things are not going to go right for her," but then she gets patched up into this marriage with an old widower with dementia. Hope because he's not loaded, but he's got more money than she does. Then he slips and falls, she's blamed for his death. Already this kind of pattern is set up, tragedy maybe like an expectation of



possibility, then she gets this cushy job. "Cushy" relative because she can eat well at this cleaning at a school, and she falls in love with a little boy who's a student there, and he ultimately betrays her in a way. She's fired from that job.

Then poor Granny Lin cannot catch a break, she's walking to the bus stop, and then her duffel bag is stolen. She's pushed to the ground, she's assaulted and robbed. Again, there's this kind of a sense of fatalism maybe, at least from my reading of it, that seemed prescribed in that story, and yet there were injections of hope. I'm wondering how do you balance all of that, grief with kind of a respite, a sense of hope? There's a lot of love that happens in this story too, so could you just walk us through your process?

**Yiyun:** Well, even though she was robbed, she did not lose her money because she always carried her money in her lunch pail. Speaking of hope, that was the hope. That was someone living by a habit of carrying everything important in the lunch pail and her logic is people can rob an old woman, but nobody is going to take an old woman's meal from her. I think that's the hope for humanity. No one is going to take an old woman's food.

How did that story get written? As you said, I think fatalism or there's some sort of doom maybe. Let me just backtrack a little. I think I don't like to plot my stories and for the reason that we don't live by plotting. I always say to my students you only need a plot if you want to murder someone, and we don't.

**Patricia:** Bringing us back to Anne Perry.

**Yiyun:** There you go. Most people don't go around murder people, so we don't need a plot. A story doesn't need a plot, I always say that, but a story needs movement. I mean movement is movement through physical space and also through time. I feel like time is possibly one of the most democratic factors in our life. A minute to me is a minute to a dictator, he will never get a longer minute than I get. I think characters' movements through time in general creates some sort of hope because unless death happens at that moment, you're going to walk past that moment, and then you have to live on. You have to find food, you have to take care of a little child. I think maybe when I write, I just think about movement through time and physical space. I just want to read, but the opening of this, there's a story I teach from Malamud called *The Bill*. I want to read the first two sentences of that story to you so you can hear how the space is used. Though the street was somewhere near a river, it was landlocked and narrow. A crooked row of aged brick tenement buildings. A child throwing a ball straight up saw a bit of pale sky. It's a landlocked street with buildings on both sides.

The story is about two families living across the street from each other, but then there's that moment a child throws the ball into the sky and catches a glimpse of a pale slice of sky.

I think that short story should just do that movement. You open up the story, so it's a street, but there's a sky. I think when you ask me, maybe I think about movement all the time.

**Patricia:** That's great. I think movement is a good segue because of how you manage time in your stories. We heard in the reason why we move back and forth in

time. I'm thinking of a story like *The Princess of Nebraska* where the real-time of the story is the time it takes to eat a chicken sandwich in a McDonald's, but the story moves continually back and forth in time. We open with two acquaintances meeting to the woman who's pregnant who's about to go get an abortion and she's meeting up with the man who is in love with the baby daddy, the father of the baby that will be aborted. The story moves back and forth. We get Boshen's backstory, we get Sasha's backstory.

We learn about the peaking opera singer who connects them who is the father of the child. Can you tell us about how you pace out a story? I noticed that a lot of your stories hit around the 20-page mark and I don't know if that's just because your editor at the *New Yorker* made you do it or that's a natural pacing. I know you say that you don't think about plot but you think about movement, so are you moving towards a certain mile-marker? Are you thinking about the change or the volta or a turn in the story? How are you thinking about this?

**Yiyun:** I think it's music. I think short story writing, novel too because I'm not a very visual person and I think I'm more intuned to song. I think the story, it's a music piece. If you listen to music, there are certain stories when I write them, I would listen to the same song again and again. For instance, *Kindness* was written when I repeated listened to *The Last Rose of Summer*, was that Moore's beautiful words, lyrics. I think in matching or pairing a story with a song or in pairing a novel with a symphony, you get the movement. Again, I think when you say, do I plan out? No, but I feel that if I can write to a certain page that one line in *The Last Rose of Summer*, that's what I try to achieve. It's all about music, I think.

**Patricia:** Oh, I love that. I heard that you were listening to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 1 over and over when you were writing your first novel because it wasn't a good piece. [chuckles]

**Yiyun:** You realize when Tchaikovsky wrote his first symphony, he was a young composer. He was still rough, so there were things you could recognize as a listener. You could recognize. Now, he's going to do the transition, now, he's going to do a repeat. When he got to the sixth symphony, he was a master. I could just listen and enjoy and just be amazed. I cannot write a novel based on Symphony No. 6, but I could do an early symphony of Tchaikovsky.

[laughter]

Oh, in a novel, sorry. That also is not very modest.

**Patricia:** I love how you can hear the mechanics at work. I want to leave some time for questions from the audience. I think we have time for two or three questions, so I'd like to invite some folks. Oh, do you want to borrow? Oh.

**Yiyun:** There is.

**Patricia:** Maybe we'll divide up the room.

**Yiyun:** Oh.

**Patricia:** I'm bringing you the microphone.

**Stephanie:** If you have a question.

**Patricia:** Maybe while we wait for a question, and please don't be shy, you can talk a little bit more about I'm curious about pedagogy because in the classroom, you're saying you can hear this. We heard a bit of a story before from your story. I read that you said that one of your characters, a fiction writer said that she has an allergic reaction to asking what's at stake in a story.

**Yiyun:** Oh, yes.

**Patricia:** Now, I feel [unintelligible 00:46:01] is a professor [laughs] who always asks what is at stake in a story. I wondered if you could talk about this more and maybe your pedagogical approach and maybe we'll let the next question take, so if you're ready.

**Yiyun:** Okay. People use certain phrases all the time and part of my reason of being allergic is I was not educated in American creative writing factory. I could not use those words. People would talk about voice and I would be very confused and say, "What is voice?" Then people talk about the art of narrative or what's at stake and people would say, "Give it to some character agency." I'm sure these are all very useful words. They are shortcuts to something that I don't understand. I have taught for 20 years. One is I don't use those words and when my students are using those words, I have to find a way to understand. I think those words are placeholder words. They're like trigonometry. They're like triangle.

You say a triangle, we all have a triangle, but there's more to that triangle than just saying it's a triangle. Teaching pedagogy, I avoid saying words that I don't know what they mean. I guess I don't want to pretend. I think one thing I teach my students is sometimes I think writers make the readers pretend they understand. I never pretend I understand everything or anything, so I also teach them to not. One is they should not pretend. Two, they should not put the readers in the very embarrassing position of having to pretend they understand the words.

[laughter]

**Patricia:** I do love that these words are just placeholder words because what is art? What is the act of writing beyond the placeholder for what's happening out there in the world?

**Yiyun:** Right, arc is very difficult for me. Arc and plot, I don't like those words because I also don't think we live by arc, but we do live by pattern and habits. I think I like patterns and habits and oftentimes characters are interesting because they have habits. I don't like writing actions, even though I do think action is important in fiction. What I think is more interesting than action is activities. I make a huge distinction between action and activity. Action is one happening.

A car chase is an action, but if someone getting out of the car in the winter, you know the bumper has those mud, those muddy snow, if someone gets out of car, the first thing he does is he kicks the muddy snow so the car can stay clean. That's activity. That tells me something about the character, so I like thinking about activities instead of action.

**Patricia:** We should all give our characters hobbies just to do.

**Attendee:** First of all, congratulations on the award. As a scientist and a background, how do you feel that influences your writing? Do you feel that your pursuit of the scientific method has an effect on how you actually think of short stories?

**Yiyun:** Very much so. Thank you very much. I was an immunologist for years. I wanted to become an immunologist and I carry a few things from science, one is discipline. When you are a scientist, you don't say, "Today I'm not inspired."

[laughter]

Or, "Today I feel a little just off, I don't have this creative Juice in me." No, when you're a scientist, you go to the lab, you do your bench work, you try, you fail, you try again. That work ethics is in me. I think you always have to put in the time and you have to do the bench work. The second thing I learned from science, I think a scientist will never say, "I know something." A scientist say, "I learned a little bit more than yesterday," and I think I carry that with my characters. I don't think a writer should ever say, "I know this character." Characters are not knowable, they're very unknowable, but you can say, "By writing the story, by eavesdropping, I get to know him a little better."

It's a constant progress, that I carried from science. The other thing is, I learned actually from my *New Yorker's* editor, she was working actually on a non-fiction piece with me about my father's death and my sons death and also my dog sitter's death and my mother-in-law. Everybody died within 14 months of time. It was a very difficult time and we were working on it. She's such a good editor. She looked at a sentence and all of a sudden she realized we were talking about something so emotionally charged. She apologized, but she didn't say, "I'm sorry, I'm making you look at the words." She said, "This is what we do when we edit; we put a piece under anesthesia so we can dissect the piece."

I thought it was the most fabulous thing someone told me and that is also about science is you have to have feelings and emotions to write, but when you really do the work, it is actually, put everything under anesthesia. It's the work itself that matters. I am a scientist still just with everything. Thank you.

**Patricia:** Thank you. I think we have time for one more question.

**Attendee:** This is not a very deep penetrating question. I was very appreciative of your comments about reading since I myself, when I try to write something, I usually find myself actually reading instead for five or ten hours. I just wonder what you're reading now, if you might share some of that with us.

**Yiyun:** I'm a slow reader and also, I'm an unhurried reader, I'm a patient reader. I often hear people say, "Oh, this book is so good, I finished in one sitting." I would be really sad if I were the writer and someone finished my book in one sitting.

[laughter]

If you think about it, we write or spend years on a book. We would like people to spend some more time with the book. I read very slowly. If I'm reading a novel, I read one chapter a day. In this way, I can finish a novel in a month, sometimes in a month and a half or in two months if it's a long novel. I think it matters to me that I want to spend as much time with the characters and with the writer's mind as the writer deserves. That said, anytime, because I read 5 to 10 hours a day, it means I'm reading 10 books at a time because I don't read one book and finish because I need to spend more time.

I just finished a book. I know everybody read, probably everybody has read Hilary Mantel, but there's an early novel called *A Change of Climate*. Has anyone read that novel here? I thought it was-

**Patricia:** It was amazing.

**Yiyun:** - the most amazing. I'm so glad you're reading and someone nodded because it's an early novel by Mantel. It's not as well known and I went to England, I asked people, I said, "Why is nobody talking about this novel?" This novel should be just a masterpiece in the past 50 years. I'm so glad you're reading it because I just cannot stop talking about that novel. I'm re-reading *Villette* by Charlotte Bronte. I also love that novel more than *Jane Eyre*. I think *Villette* is an older person's novel.

**Patricia:** Oh, that means fighting words because I'm an *Airhead*, I'm a *Jane Airhead*. [laughs]

**Yiyun:** Oh, I do like *Jane Airhead*, but *Villette* is so much muddier.

**Patricia:** It was so much in French, so it was so hard for me.

**Yiyun:** Oh, I know.

**Patricia:** I'm like, "Oh, I will skip this."

**Yiyun:** No, after you read *War and Peace*, you will be fluent in French.

[laughter]

**Patricia:** What else?

**Yiyun:** I think I'm reading Montaigne's essays at this moment, just re-reading. I think any time when life is confusing, I read Montaigne. I've been reading the short stories of Malamud's lately and re-reading actually. Most of my reading are re-reading. I think re-reading is more important than the fresh reading. When I discovered *A Change of Climate*, I thought I was just going to cry. No, I wasn't crying, I would not cry, but I was going to say, "Oh, wow, this is a novel which should be on top of everybody's list." Don't you think?

**Patricia:** Yes. On that point, thank you so much.

**Yiyun:** Thank you.

**Patricia:** Now, I'd like to invite Janna Malamud Smith to present the award.

**Janna Malamud Smith:** Thank you all for coming this evening. I'm so pleased to have a ceremony at American University and grateful to Dolen Perkins-Valdez and the university administrators for supporting it. I also want to thank PEN/Faulkner very much, and particularly the members of the PEN/Malamud committee as you can see for their careful astute effort each year to select a winner. My part this evening is both, I have a pleasure of handing the award to the winner and also in some tiny way of providing a living link back to my father Bernard Malamud in whose memory we created this award in 1988.

As people have said and as some of you know, he was a writer of novels and short stories and some felt that his short stories manifest his talent at it's best. He was born in 1914 in Brooklyn New York to a poor and troubled Russian-Jewish immigrant family and died in 1986 after a life filled with effort and striving, one in which he realized his youthful ambition of becoming a fine writer. Just as an aside, he was disciplined. He was a joke in his community because he was at his desk at 9:00 in the morning and he stayed there for half a day every day, and then he taught and worked. My brother Paul Malamud, who always attended this event with me, died six weeks ago. In 2021, he wrote a short memoir.

I would like to read you two paragraphs of his about Dad in the 1950s around the time Dad's first novel, *The Natural*, appeared. Paul seeks to find words for the man he idolized when he was a small boy. From the beginning, Paul writes, it felt that he was different from other men I saw around me. I could not have put it into words, but he seemed smarter, more sensitive, maybe more downbeat with a surreal sense of humor and tendency to turn everything into stories. He talked more than most, he read vast numbers of books. His exuberant sense of humor and fantasy were rare.

He had a lively interest in almost everyone he met and tended to see people like the events of his day as interesting stories in themselves, their inner lives as he tried to ascertain them with stories within stories. It had nothing to do with relative wealth or local importance, richer or poor, they made him curious about the human mind and personality and he always wondered what made people tick. Television existed in the early 1950s, but dad had little interest in getting one, life was enough. I would only add that life was enough for Bernard Malamud as long as he could write stories.

He lived to put pen to paper, to create fictive works that would resonate with readers and perhaps even stand the test of time. He believed literature and all serious art at its best offered a companionship immune to loss, a counterweight to suffering really. As a child, he had known plenty of both. In the preface of one of his books, Bernard Berenson, the great Italian Renaissance art historian ponders the question of what makes a great painting. He suggests that a good rough test is whether "we feel that it is reconciling us with life". Whether we feel that it's reconciling us with life, wow. Think about it, it's a high bar.

It is also an observation I really believe my father would have found sympathetic and true for literature as well. We sometimes sat and read side by side on the couch in Oregon when I was growing up later in Vermont, and had he the volume in his hand, he might even have read Berenson's words aloud to me. He was like that, yet always a teacher, always ready to qualify whatever someone else said. He would, of course, had pointed out that for him and in his writing such a reconciliation existed most meaningfully on the far side of suffering.

Quibbles aside, it is exactly because a fine story can offer such a profound, and ultimately, ineffable gift, an ineffable word, people, right? That I am honored, really honored and just delighted by tonight to give this year's PEN/Malamud Award for excellence in the short story to Yiyun Li. Thank you.

**[pause 01:02:07]**

**Yiyun:** Thank you, Janna. I think I'm going to tell two stories. You have heard me tonight enough, but I'm going to tell you two tales about two great story writers who both mean so much to me. The first one is my mentor, James Alan McPherson. Some of you may have heard of his name. He was the first African American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize in fiction. I met James when I was in Iowa as a scientist. I was actually a scientist. I took a class with him, a summer workshop with him when I was a scientist and he called me into his office. He said, "Tell me what's your deal." I said, "I'm a scientist, but I want to be a writer."

He said, "What do you mean you want to be a writer?" and then he banged my story on the desk, he said, "You are a writer." He was the one to introduce Bernard Malamud stories to me because when he came out of Georgia, he grew up in Savannah, Georgia in a segregated community. When he went to Boston for law school, I think an editor introduced Malamud to him, and then he passed his work on to me, so thank you the teacher of my teacher. It means so much for me to get this award and this honor. The second writer, because I know Patty prepared, it's William Trevor, the very wonderful, great Irish short story writer.

Later in his life, I became friends with him. He gave a last life in-person reading in 2010, I think, in a farmhouse in Sussex. I took the airplane, I flew all the way to England to hear him read. It was very funny because there was a milking machine next door and by four o'clock, the milking machine had to be turned on to milk the cows and he was reading.

It was a very beautiful setting. Then we took the train back together from Lewes station to London, and on the platform, there was a long line waiting for him to sign the book and he said to me, he said there was a long line waiting to sign.

At the end of the line, there was a man without a book and he came to me, he said, "Mr. Trevor, my wife loved your stories and when she was dying, I could do nothing for her, so I read your story to her and she died while I was reading your story to her." Then Trevor turned to me and said, "You always know that's why you write stories." Thank you very much.

**Gwydion Suilebhan:** Hello, everyone. I am Gwydion Suilebhan. I'm the executive director of the PEN/Faulkner Foundation. I am so grateful. I really want to thank Yiyun Li, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Stephanie Grant, American University, Lou Byard, and Janna Malamud Smith, and even Paul Malamud for making tonight possible. We really couldn't do it without everyone coming together, so thank you. In fact, this is a time of year where many of us are taking stock of the things we're all grateful for, and the thing that I am most grateful for this year is the ability to have rich robust vibrant literary experiences like this one.

If you're one of the people in the audience and there are several of you who make that possible by supporting PEN/Faulkner, thank you. Thank you a thousand times over. It's our mission to make sure that as many people as possible of all ages around DC and around the country have access to things like this because this helps us see ourselves and learn about ourselves and grow as human beings, so thank you, again, a thousand times for your support. With that, I just want to say we've got a book signing, we've got a little reception.

I'm so glad you're here and I hope you will put on your mental calendars to join us on May 11th for the PEN/Faulkner Awards celebration at the MLK Library which is going to be another great evening and we've got lots of stuff between now and then, so if you're not on our mailing list, please get on. For now, have a great night.

**[01:07:32] [END OF AUDIO]**