

Thank you, Jon, for reading that lovely introduction by Doris. We are sorry that she could not be here in person tonight. And good evening to everyone here. Whether you are an author, a publishing colleague, a Simon & Schuster business contact, or are here for any other reason, I want to thank you for standing with us to support the important work of PEN America. And I would also like to thank the PEN America staff and everyone at Simon & Schuster who has worked so hard to make this evening such a success.

And thanks, of course, to Stephen King: it has been a singular honor for Scribner and Simon & Schuster to be his publisher for 20 years, as during all that time he has kept us fully engaged working to keep up with your vast creativity and energy. For his lifetime work and generosity to other authors and artists, he is richly deserving of tonight's honor.

I am truly flattered to accept this honor, from such a distinguished organization that has for decades fought so valiantly and effectively for human rights and the right of free speech and expression, while promoting literature and the right to publish in so many places around the world.

For those of us dedicated to introducing the work of writers to the world, it is repugnant when someone, anyone – whether it is the general public, media pundits, local school boards, or the government -- tries to stop us from publishing; to dictate who or what we can publish; or to limit who can purchase or read the books that we publish. Even worse, of course, are punitive actions against a writer or journalist.

And while it is true that the public square has always been a noisy and unruly place, the fact is we are living in a time when the issue of free speech is incredibly fraught, and more complicated than ever, as we grapple not only with the political currents of our

time, but also with the explosive growth and ubiquity of powerful social media platforms and their effect on human interaction and communication.

In today's world, when arguments or debates are taking place at lightning speed, on forums where nuance is either impossible, or worse, not sought, we are too often witness to the crush of hive-minded crowds that seek only to affirm their rightness. In too many instances we have ceded effort toward a rational, higher-level discourse that can elucidate rather than exacerbate our differences, have ceased to actually exchange or evaluate ideas, and have watched as discussion is hijacked into what is essentially a phony debate over free speech -- the political sideshow that diverts us from the original topic.

Opinions differ, and opinions matter, and they have the ability to spark genuine debate about issues and ideas of real substance, discussions that can help, in the words of PEN, to "bridge divisions that hinder our mutual understanding on contentious issues." And I would add that the writers, journalists and publishers that constitute so much of PEN America and its membership are uniquely positioned to provide the outlets where these discussions can happen, and to add critical insight and perspective of the highest level.

It is thus all the more important to reassert our core belief that free speech, the actual discussion and debate of ideas -- ideas that can be good or bad, progressive or regressive, new or antiquated, revolutionary or status quo, mild or offensive, half-baked or fully cooked, and yes, liberal or conservative -- is and needs to remain the right of every citizen in our society, along with our obligation to protect that speech. When it comes to the right of unfettered discourse we should not, we cannot, accept dissent-quashing tyranny from any side of the political spectrum.

Yes, in our country too many voices are marginalized, or powerless, and through our choices of what to publish we have the ability and the obligation to help change that. It would be very easy to publish only those voices and perspectives with which we identify

or feel comfortable. But I have always felt that it is our responsibility as publishers to step outside of that comfort zone and engage with different points of view, and to publish for the many different audiences that comprise our nation's readership. In the words of the late and brilliant publisher Peter Mayer, "trouble is at the heart of what we do, in the sense that worthwhile books trouble our complacency - sharpening our minds and senses. Some are even dangerous, and they too must be published."

But for all the noise, the demonization of the media, the bellicose threats to press freedoms, the outrage over politically incorrect speech and the backlash against the politically correct, at the end of the day we are fortunate to live in a nation where the First Amendment has for so long protected our right to expression. Our presence here tonight signifies that we do not take, and we cannot take, this right for granted.

As we watch with alarm the rise of authoritarians, autocrats and strongmen in so many nations around the world, where a free media and a genuine opposition party are often the first casualty, our longstanding arguments about the limits of free speech, as fierce and aggravating as they sometimes may be, provide a sobering reminder of the plight of many our colleagues -- writers, journalists, publishers and free thinkers -- in so many other nations.

We are in a unique position in that we have the freedom and place from which we can advocate, as PEN America unceasingly does, on behalf of others who are not so fortunate.

Tonight we heard of the plight of Reuters reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, arrested for exposing a massacre in a Rohingya village, and still incarcerated: they have sacrificed more than most of us can imagine in order to speak truth to power.

I applaud and thank PEN America for its constant efforts to set them, and so many others, free, and to shine a light into those dark corners of the world where truth, honesty and free expression are so brutally suppressed.

And in a few minutes we will honor student activists Cameron Casky, Samantha Fuentes and Zion Kelly. Their courage, bravery and determination to speak out in aftermath of the horrific events in their schools -- places that by all rights should be safe harbors and sanctuaries for learning – is a bright shining example and inspiration to us all.

Thank you, again, for being here tonight.