

A JOINT PROJECT  
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Alliance of  
Academies

# On Freedom of Artistic Expression in Literature in the 21st Century

Workshop

Public Discussion

Café Climate

26–27  
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HOMERTON COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



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# *Introduction*

by **Daljit Nagra**

When I was sworn in as an Honorary Fellow of Homerton College last year, the Principal, Lord Woolley encouraged me to bring any exciting new initiatives to his attention. Spurred on by our conversation, I suggested a conference to be held at Homerton College featuring writers from the UK and from the European Alliance of Academies. Lord Woolley was keen to approve a conference, and one whose focus would be on Freedom of Speech. This subject has become a source of fascination for all constituencies including politicians and the media.

Freedom of artistic expression is increasingly under attack across Europe. In this conference, European writers will discuss about the manifold forms and effects of censorship. What does that mean for our democracies? And how can the European community create sustainable networks that can act in solidarity, especially in times of need. Since 2020, the European Alliance of Academies, a network of 70 art academies and cultural institutions has joined forces to defend the freedom of art in Europe.

It is my hope that at the conference, we can all come together, along with the acclaimed writers who make up the panels and the workshops, to hear different views on this subject. I hope we can consider how freedom of expression operates across nations, so we expose and explore the complications of this joyous phrase, freedom of speech. I am sure we will consider the impact of freedom of expression on writers, who has the right to speak and who is heard. This is a much contested topic and the conference will involve creative expression alongside serious debate, and a chance to discover and meet some internationally writers over the weekend.

This conference would not have been possible were it not for the dedication of David Whitley, Georgina Horrell, Christiane Lötsch and Anna-Marie Ördögh, and for the support of the many acclaimed writers who will be engaging with the audience composed of the general public and school students. The conference was supported by authors from the Royal Society of Literature, Akademie der Künste, Czech Literary Centre, Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature and the Society of Hungarian Authors and takes place in co-operation with Homerton College.

# Bianca Bellová

*Bianca Bellová is a Czech author of six novels and many short stories. Her novel "The Lake" won the Czech national Magnesia Litera Award for the Book of the Year, the EU Prize for Literature and its English translation has been awarded with the EBRD Literary Prize. It has been translated into 23 languages.*

## The Lake

Excerpt from the novel "The Lake", published by Parthian Books 2022, translated by Alex Zucker

Nami, bathed in sweat, holds his grandma's blubbery hand. The waves from the lake slap against the concrete pier. He hears screams, more like shrieks, coming from the town beach. If he's on the blanket with his grandma and grampa, it must be a Sunday. There's one other person there too. Nami pictures three dark spots, the three triangles of a bikini, with a long dark tail of hair hanging down, brushed out like the tail of a horse, and two dark tufts of hair visible in the underarms. The three triangles move slowly in the sun, turning over again and again, until there's only one. A little way offshore, a catfish lazily flicks its tail.

'The surface seems lower than it used to be,' Nami's grandma says, smacking a fly as it lands on her belly. She chews roasted sunflower seeds, purchased from the stand on the beach, spit-ting the shells onto the concrete in front of her.

'What're you talking about?' Nami's grampa laughs. 'Women's wisdom – second worst thing in the world, next to a hangover!' He rocks back and forth as he laughs, hands on his thighs. In one hand, wedged between the dirty, chewed-up fingers, is an unfiltered cigarette. The three triangles pick up a thermos, turn to Nami, and pour him a cup of mint tea.

'Have a drink, dove.' Well, what do you know? The three triangles have a voice. It's pleasantly deep, like the old well behind their house. Nami takes a drink. The honey-sweetened tea is delicious, sliding easily down his throat.

'Let's go, dove,' his grampa says. 'You don't want anyone calling you a sissy. Every boy around here can swim by the time they're three.' He runs a hand over his rounded belly. Flicks the cigarette butt into the water, where it lands with a hiss. Nami doesn't want to go in the water. He wants to lie on the blanket, resting his head on his grandma's soft belly and watching the three red triangles. He attempts to lift a hand, but it just drops lazily back in his lap.

'Go on, Nami,' his grandma says. 'I'll buy you a lollipop.' The cellophane always sticks to the lollipop. You can never get it off. The only time Nami ever gets one is on World Peace Day or when the three triangles come to visit. He doesn't really like the taste of burnt sugar and violets, but he so rarely gets one that he always looks forward to it and is willing to do whatever he's asked.

Nami slowly gets to his feet, but before he can fully stand he finds himself flying through the air. 'Now swim, sturgeon!' his grampa shouts, bursting into laughter.

## Workshop 2

### Description

What would I as an experienced author tell my younger inexperienced self? What matters the most, what are the shortcuts and what should I avoid when writing?

# Réka Borda

*Réka Borda (1992, Hungary) is a writer, poet, editor, and PhD researcher. So far she has published one book of poetry and one novel. She is particularly interested in the relationship between people and the environment and the impact of power on society. A former PEN Catalá and Fondation Jan Michalski fellow, she is in her sixth year of organizing literary camps for emerging talents. Her texts have been translated into English, Slovak, Norwegian, Spanish and Catalan.*

## Night with the Prime Minister

Published in Radnóti Magazin, Budapest 2022, translated by Austin Wagner

I didn't want a youth like this, I say to the prime minister.  
Only the weak rant and rave, he responds, and turns out the light.  
That's just how he is: another time he says, a friend is an enemy.  
But how can we sleep in each other's hair  
and still freeze every winter? We alone can lend the other warmth  
with talk of cheap milk and the sparks of bitterness.

I'll try to make it up to you, I whisper as I nestle beside him.  
He never really loved me, but also cannot leave me. Between ten forty  
and ten fifty at night I realize, I brought him on myself.  
By eleven I amend this for society. Do you hear that, friends?  
Here lies the man in whom our families suffer, give us back  
our contours, this very stomach is consuming the tomorrow  
which, I now see, we did not really deserve.

A silent good night, the prime minister says,  
and pulls the blanket to his ears. Comforter soaked in fearful sweat,  
tank top sucker-punched in the cellar, pajamas raped;  
the bed is sagging with sweat. I, born in 1992, carry  
in me the hatred of fate: the first slap on the bottom  
and our dirty affairs cry out. Can I only be  
what I was made to be? Sinful successor, waning Hungarian, a person?  
In this order? Why could I not be, say, a line which encircles  
the unscrupulous? Or the country penitent in its own cruelty?

I close my eyes. In case they're gone when I open them: the law-black  
century or the prime minister. Rather the latter. But I look at him,  
and his sharp, Rubik's cube features, and I am ashamed for not liking  
him.

I didn't want this, I shake his shoulders, and he hugs my youth,  
squeezes it, and falls asleep. He is a great man, but the wakefulness is  
greater, and more powerful than that is only the what-if.

# Ferenc Czinki

*Ferenc Czinki was born in Székesfehérvár, Hungary in 1982. Journalist, essayist, and fiction author, he publishes in national newspapers such as "Magyar Narancs" and "Élet és Irodalom" and literary journals such as "Kalligram", "Hévíz", and "Irodalmi Szemle". His novel "A pozsonyi metro" (The Bratislava Metro) was published in 2017 and his short story collection "Egy kocsmá város" (A Pub City) appeared in 2014. He is an international cultural manager, member of several cultural organizations, president of Szépirodalmi Társasága (Society of Hungarian Authors).*

## Comrade Solidarity is Away on Business

Published in Kapitál, Bratislava 2019/06, translated by László Mózner

I was born in the last decade of existing socialism, on the seventh of November, the sixty-fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, which happened to be a Sunday, by the way. I start primary school in the year of the change of regime, I am in my first year of high school when Hungary joins NATO, and the eleventh of September in two thousand and one marks my first day at college. So much for living in history. At this time, everybody studying journalism wants to become a war correspondent or an opinion journalist. Me too, but somehow it strikes me that the lecturers are teaching not only press history in the past tense, but press ethics as well now. Anyway, I am putting it down to the fact that this is a troubled decade and the last one was a very troubled century, so I am not complaining.

I still do not believe that literature should be political; I would reserve that luxury for myself, but then suddenly politics started to interfere with literature. Politics touched us, and it was not pleasant. Nobody asked it to. In Hungary, there are two of everything, and this time, for once, this is not a kind of gentrified hedonism, but a total lack of public agreement. Of everything, there is one of this kind and one of that. Two organisations for young writers, two organisations for writers that are not young, two organisations for theatre professionals, for doctors, for everyone; an endless series of academies, foundations, non-profit companies, associations, circles, platforms, and unions. One of this kind, one of that kind.

Sometimes one side is a little better off, other times the other. Lately, it has permanently been the other side. I am convinced that the so-called Christian-conservative government, increasingly drifting to the far-right, has built its lasting power not because it is so extremely sophisticated, even if this the myth that is beginning to spread. The situation is much simpler. They have noticed that there is a total lack of convergence in the country, not only between the various professions, social strata, and ethnic groups, but also within them. Sometime in the 1990s, Comrade Solidarity, in his short-sleeved shirt, his confectionary suit, his mobile telephone in his pocket, his heart full of hope, and a nervous flicker in his eyes, boarded a plane and went overseas on a business trip. He still writes from here and there, from beautiful places, but less and less often. The system works fine without him.

I still believe in writing good literature, not pamphlets, speeches, or posts. Because in principle, that includes everything; that is the way it is meant to be. It is in its nature. Although we have to write and read alone, once we close the book, it is with this ammunition that we go out into the world and participate in social existence. While literature and art are, of course, by their very nature eternally oppositional. Or so I think. They have no other choice, yet they often choose something else. What is it like today to be a writer, to work in literature, at the end of the free Hungary's third decade? I suppose it is not so very different from most other decades, but I am sure it is not different from being anything else or doing anything else. The intellectual bubble does not exist.

We have common tasks. I will not go on now. I would just like to say that at some point, hopefully in the not-too-distant future, I would like to return from this new Hungary to that not too old Hungarian Republic. I would like to go home from home. Maybe it is not so far away yet. Of course, it would not have been a bad idea to unroll a thread or scatter some pebbles to navigate our way home, because right now it seems as if we are having a hard time finding our way back. And then I said something about one possible task of literature.

## Daljit Nagra

*Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University, Chair of the Royal Society of Literature, Council of Society of Authors, a PBS New Generation Poet, presenter of the weekly Poetry Extra on Radio 4 Extra, Daljit Nagra, MBE, has published four poetry collections, all with Faber & Faber, which have won the Forward Prize for Best Individual Poem and Best First Book, the South Bank Show Decibel Award and the Cholmondeley Award, and been shortlisted for the Costa Prize and twice for the TS Eliot Prize.*

*My extract is a poem written for the King's Coronation and performed by the actor James Nesbitt at the Coronation Party, as televised on BBC1, 7th May 2023.*

### We're Lighting Up The Nation

No one's an island when each is at home  
in the hope and glory! Born free – we're a plucky bunch  
of every shade. From the bronze of the Celts  
across our Roman roads to Windrush and beyond,  
today, just now, the spectacular parades of light  
travelling from Windsor to iconic heartlands across the realm  
so the kingdom be unified. Imagine Edinburgh Castle  
near monuments for Scott and Burns, or imagine  
across the waters of Belfast our titanic dockyard  
and the blood-sweat, the toil that launched a thousand ships  
over there's Blackpool for Punch & Judy, glad rags  
for the tango and foxtrot, and out for a pint of Newkie Brown  
by the Gateshead Bridge, that harp of the Toon, the Tyne – it's all mine  
now all Yorkshire beams from the hall of seven-hilled Sheffield,  
now my heart's with the famed anthem, the land of my fathers  
at Cardiff Millennium! Everywhere I look, from the golden  
miles of Leicester with their chicken masalas and jollof rice  
to an eco-haven amid the botanical gardens of Cambridge  
like the oasis at Eden with its rainforest under a dome,  
to our bold promise of the cliffs of Dover, everywhere I look,  
within our shores, I feel a new phase, new chapter must begin,  
just now, so let's light up the nation like a smile!



# Bhanu Kapil

*Bhanu Kapil, FRSL is a Fellow of Churchill College. She is the author of six books, including "How To Wash A Heart", winner of the TS Eliot Prize.*

## The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers

Excerpts from "The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers", Kelsey Street Press, Berkely 2001

"In the language we made up one night, the word for lover was the same as the word for neatly folded manuscript you don't look at for a year. There are many manuscripts."

"When she is grown, she realizes that she has forgotten everything. How to live without explanations. How to travel light. How to let the earth go. How skin can see."

"The sky is pale blue, darkening to an indigo that contains black, but isn't black at the edge of sight. At the same time the sun is shining brightly. (The world is everything at once.)"

1. Who are you and whom do you love?
2. Where did you come from / how did you arrive?
3. How will you begin?
4. How will you live now?
5. What is the shape of your body?
6. Who was responsible for the suffering of your mother?
7. What do you remember about the earth?
8. What are the consequences of silence?
9. Tell me what you know about dismemberment.
10. Describe a morning you woke without fear.
11. How will you / have you prepare(d) for your death?
12. And what would you say if you could?"

"This is a specific example of a hunger that is immigrant, in that you find yourself unable to ask for what you really want."

### Workshop 1

## Description

We will engage with questions as part of a proprioceptive writing practice that will include reflection on art making itself as a place or site of liberation. Come with a notebook or device to write with. Writers from all genres are welcome.

# Kenan Malik

*Kenan Malik is a writer, lecturer and broadcaster, and a columnist for the Observer. After studying neurobiology, and then history and philosophy of science, he has, over the past 30 years, combined academic research with popular writing and journalism. His main areas of interest are the history of ideas, political and moral philosophy, and the history and sociology of race and immigration.*

*His latest book, "Not So Black and White", is a history of ideas of race and identity. Previous books include "The Search for a Moral Compass" (2014), "From Fatwa to Jihad" (2009), shortlisted for the Orwell Prize and "Strange Fruit" (2008), nominated for the Royal Society Science Book Prize.*

## The EU pays Africa's brutal militias to lock up migrants. Britain wants to follow suit

4th June 2023

"Please help, today one person self dead by petrol because hopeless." Sally Hayden received the text in October 2018. The Irish Times journalist was one of the few outsiders trusted by refugees locked up in Libya. The text was about Abdulaziz, who had been forced to flee his native Somalia to escape al-Shabaab, the al-Qaida-linked Islamist group waging terror in east Africa.

After a perilous journey across the desert, Abdulaziz was locked up in Triq al-Sikka, a grim prison in Tripoli, Libya. Why? Because the EU pays Libyan militias millions of euros to detain anyone deemed a possible migrant to Europe. Like many other similar prisons across Libya, Triq al-Sikka is a place of hunger, disease, beatings, rape, torture and death. Death by starvation, death by beatings, death by execution. And death by suicide. After nine months' incarceration, Abdulaziz felt so bereft of hope that he seized a container of petrol used to fuel a generator, doused himself and lit a match. Hayden was the only journalist to report on his death.

I don't know whether the UK's immigration minister Robert Jenrick knows about Abdulaziz. Last week, he visited countries on either side of the Mediterranean (though not Libya) to persuade political leaders to take tougher measures against asylum seekers and undocumented migrants crossing the Mediterranean, to get north African governments to "stop the boats" a thousand miles from British waters.

In all this, Jenrick was coat-tailing EU politicians who for more than a decade have been stitching up deals with virtually every coercive force in the region, however reactionary or repulsive, funding them handsomely to lock up potential migrants to Europe. These deals have done little to undermine smuggling gangs but have been catastrophic both for asylum seekers and migrants and for the peoples of north and east Africa and the Sahel. The charred body of Abdulaziz is a reminder of the human cost of these deals.

From the EU's 2010 compact with Muammar Gaddafi; to its subsequent agreements with militias and warlords after western intervention had shattered Libya; to the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa set up in November 2015 as the Syrian war caused a sharp peak in migrants and panic in European capitals; to the Khartoum Process, which drew in countries in the east of Africa, including Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and South Sudan; to bilateral deals with countries such as Turkey and Niger – the EU has disbursed billions of euros in an effort to persuade non-European countries to act as its immigration police.

The result has been the creation of a huge kidnap and detention industry from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, from the Mediterranean to the Sahel. Prisons, warehouses, even zoos, have been repurposed for the caging of migrants. A leaked EU internal memorandum in 2020 acknowledged that capturing migrants was now "a profitable business model". In Libya, militias and people smugglers have rebadged themselves as "coastguards" trained and funded by the EU to capture migrants at sea and force them into Libyan detention.

Policymakers who put great store on 'defending sovereignty' are happy to trample over the sovereignty of poorer nations.

In Triq al-Sikka and other detention centres, "acts of murder, enslavement, torture, rape and other inhumane acts are committed against migrants", observed a damning UN report, "in furtherance of a state policy". European leaders have long been aware of this, but have chosen to shut their eyes to the reality of their policies, pretending, as British politicians do, that they are moral crusaders challenging the evils of people smugglers.

# Annelies Verbeke

*Annelies Verbeke debuted in 2003 and has since written 4 novels, 4 short story collections, 2 novellas, 6 plays, and other books. Her work is published in 26 languages and has won various prizes. In 2022 she received two oeuvre awards. Verbeke is an advocate for the short story genre. She was a member of PEN Flanders, and is one of the KANTL and the collective Fix dit, for which she makes a podcast series which champions greater diversity in the canon and the literary field.*

## On Guard Here

Short Story in "Assumptions", World Editions Ltd., London 2015, translated by Liz Waters

This is solitary confinement. A prison. He never takes me out, it doesn't even occur to him. As a rule she cares about nothing but herself – shockingly negative, she's sure to come to a bad end. Yet she does sometimes take account of my needs. On occasions I even think she appreciates me and I too have my good moments, my little breathing spaces in this vale of tears, there at her side. If I lay my head in her lap she'll stroke it absently, and even when I shove my nose between her buttocks in a regressive outburst she doesn't get angry. Yes, Father. Regression. Between her buttocks. I can't say it often enough: not doing too well.

There's a question that haunts me, Father, a question that keeps me awake or makes me whine in my sleep. Before I ask it I want to remind you that I've never had any qualms about your decisions before. I really gave all I had during your previous initiative. I'm convinced you've not once had grounds to reproach me for a lack of team spirit or personal motivation. I never even complained about the post-traumatic stress disorder that first attempt left me with – for all your omniscience, it's probably news to you. I believed in what you were doing, what we were doing. But then I was a man, a human among human beings. And I understand why you wanted to take a different approach the second time, I really do, it's a rationale I comprehend and endorse. Like you, I was disappointed by the result last time round and I can understand that you thought: alright then, let's take a risk, let's go for a surprise offensive. But why a dog, Father?

There's no doubting the special bond between human and pet, but surely it's not enough, surely it's no recompense, no ticket to Salvation? What do you expect me to do? Perform miracles? Foster a world religion? Become the main character in the greatest bestseller of all time again? I barely get out!

And now that I've had the gall to ask for an explanation, here's another question: if I must be a dog, why a schnauzer? I have infinite admiration for all the fauna you've created. Each creature is beautiful in its own highly individual way and it's breathtaking to discover how they all slot together like pieces of the most ingenious puzzle. Yet it seems obvious to me that every living being, simply by existing, places limits on the practicality of expectations. That was your opinion too until recently, wasn't it?

Your plan? Otherwise it would soon all be over for the Almighty, right?

I find it so hard to believe that you still haven't recognized the fact that the form in which you've sent me to earth is incompatible with what you wish to achieve, Father. As a schnauzer I really am subject to too many limitations. It's hard for me to have to expound upon something so absurdly obvious. I'm short-sighted but not blind. During those rare walks I notice how the German shepherds and Dobermans look at me. At best they think I'm a sweet little boy-dog. Why a schnauzer, Father? For all the hallucinogenic substances this planet has to offer and for all the insanity that prevails here, no living creature would feel the slightest urge to seek salvation at my hands. I have no hands, Father.

## Description

## Workshop 4

Annelies Verbeke's literature experiments with content and form. She likes to bring together different perspectives, and explores that of the outsider. She loves short story collections, going against the commercial demands of the market. For her novel "Thirty days" she chose a male main character of Senegalese origin, and her play "There we go again (white male privilege)" was set up as a zoo human for white people. She is part of a writers' collective that is concerned about how even widely acclaimed female writers tend to lose their status when the history of literature is written. A talk about touching the subjects of racism and sexism, looking at yourself, and why it's liberating to write from an animal perspective every now and then.

# Cécile Wajsbrodt

*Cécile Wajsbrodt was born in Paris in 1954. She writes novels, sometimes essays, radio dramas. In her five novels cycle about art the last one, "Destruction", evokes a dystopic dictatorship in France forbidding all kind of arts except entertainment. Her seminars in Berlin, Dresden or Innsbruck have been dealing with climate in literature and natural catastrophes. She lives both in Paris and Berlin.*

*The speech was held at the conference "European Alliance of Academies: Artistic Freedom in Times of War and Crisis", Akademie der Künste, 15 December 2022.*

## I am in favour of keeping our distance

Words, words, words - says Hamlet. But for us who write, words are like fine figures, like fragile persons, which we should handle with care. And because we use them every day in everyday life without giving them a second thought, it is a challenge to transform language into literature.

We are surrounded by words from the news - words like war, climate crisis, terrorism, pandemic. Words that cause fear, that hint at tragedy, words that freeze reflection. Artistic freedom can only take place if we distance ourselves from everyday language, from the usual words in use. If we write them down directly - together with the thoughts they carry, which they transmit - that is, if we use a second-hand language, we then only write banally, we also think banally. There is no need for literature for that. In the prison of fashion, in the whirlpool of everyday life, there is no room for literature. Literature means loneliness, means withdrawal. I am only free when I no longer hear the loud echo of events. Of course we all live in one, the same world, of course the events of the everyday world affect creativity.

When the Second World War broke out, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary, „Now we have become journalists“. By this she meant, now we can only write articles, think short and fast, but can no longer write novels, no

work that allows continuity in space and time. When such events as the Second World War or the war in Ukraine or global warming occur, when they shape our everyday lives, it is impossible to write about them immediately, impossible not to write about them. Of course we should take a stand on important events - as citizens....But can we spontaneously express our feelings, our thoughts artistically, find new forms for them? Artistic freedom is not simply freedom of expression. Literature belongs to another dimension in which time flows more slowly - and via detours. Past, present and future are not always in a straight line and not always in the same order next to each other as in our lives - the past can come after the future as in Alice in Mirrorland, where Alice says, „I can't remember things before they happen“, where the queen replies, „that's a poor memory that only works backwards“.

Artistic freedom means finding that dimension, inventing it. To move freely in writing is to open new windows, to create unexpected possibilities - in a word, to expand the world. To do this, we have to distance ourselves from the chorus of commentary, from ready-made thinking. There are ready-made books that are written quickly, where the sentences can be written down almost automatically with the words of the newspapers - like the corrections and suggestions of our smartphones, where everything is already pre-set, where the zeitgeist is accurately reflected. Freedom, on the other hand, is an empty space that everyone can fill in for themselves. We have to find the way on our own and that means searching - and searching takes time, as long as we have the courage to simply remain silent. We need time, we need silence to be able to hear other voices, voices that also speak in the books. We are not the first to have experienced such events, to have gone through such trials. What did they write then, what did they think? Paradoxically, it is the voices of the past that give us permission to continue on our own path, because they have already gone their own way and thus created their works. A permission as a passport to freedom. Then we can write freely - far from the mainstream - and hopefully pass on this freedom so that there is less mainstream.

## Café Climate

### Description

“Café Climate” is an open space format designed to encourage discussions and exchanges about the climate crisis and emergency. We sit all of us in small groups as in a café to exchange upon various issues.

Three main points will be discussed:

- Climate change and democracy
- Climate change, culture and art
- Climate change and impact upon our lives, our responsibility

We would each time be:

- pointing to facts
- reflecting about issues
- paving the way for solutions

# Marina Warner

*Marina Warner writes fiction and cultural history. Her award-winning books explore myths and fairy tales; they include "From the Beast to the Blonde" (1994) and "Stranger Magic: Charmed States & the Arabian Nights" (2011). She has published five novels, including "The Lost Father" (1988), "Indigo" (1992) and "The Leto Bundle" (2001), three collections of short stories and essays on literature and art. "Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An unreliable memoir (2021)" evokes her childhood in Egypt. From 2017 till 2022, she was President of the Royal Society of Literature and since 2016, has been working with the project [www.storiesintransit.org](http://www.storiesintransit.org) in Sicily. She is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Birkbeck College and is currently writing a book about the concept of Sanctuary.*

## Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir

Excerpt from "Inventory of a Life Mislaid: An Unreliable Memoir", William Collins, London, 2021, in US, retitled "Esmond & Ilia: An Unreliable Memoir", New York Review Books, 2022; pp 352-354, when my father bookshop in Cairo had been burned down in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952:

...Maybe Abdel in his babouches, Mohammed with his rattan carpet beater, and Ahmed the doorman at Soliman House; maybe Nanny One who I so thoughtlessly rejected and maybe Nanny Three, Adriana Barakat, with their bags of sugar-dusted pistachio-stuffed loukoumi, and the suffragis, bawabs, barmen, valets and drivers, shop assistants, barbers, hairdressers, beauticians, delivery men, attendants and receptionists who worked in the hotels and the clubs, the restaurants, department stores, garages, and other services, especially in the places where the English and the French enjoyed themselves, along with other members of the ruling class, the businessmen, agents, journalists, diplomats, maybe these Egyptians took part in the rebellion. Or their friends and associates did. They belonged to the groups and occupations of people whom historians have now identified as those who threw themselves into the uprising. Some of them I knew personally and loved as a child loves those who care for her, Nanny One, whose name I have lost and Nanny Three, who was called Barakat, 'blessing'. But I can't enter their minds and besides, even if I could, shouldn't ascribe them thoughts or deeds. I can imagine what while the destruction and its consequences made them anxious for their livelihoods, they hoped for a new time that would bring change for the better and restore their pride.

The fellaheen who suffered the most from the excessive riches and power of the property owners and the rulers were not in the city and it does not seem they came in from the fields and the villages to join in the rioting. No, the news spread to those who worked with the élite and for them – who knew them.

The burning of books: the scene repeats over time, in reality and in fantasy: books and fire set up a fundamental antimony, emblematic of a catastrophic destiny, a final apocalyptic omen of a civilisation ending. Books and flames are haunted by history, especially in Egypt where the Library at Alexandria, where the Bible was translated into Greek, was founded by Alexander the Great, but was destroyed many times – in the third century BCE Christians set out deliberately burning books of pagan philosophy. History is spotted with zealots searching out books to consign them to the flames.

# Mariah Whelan

*Mariah Whelan is an award-winning poet living in Oxfordshire, UK. She is the author of the novel-in-sonnets “the love i do to you” which was shortlisted for the Poetry Book Awards, the Melita Hume Prize and won the AM Heath Prize. She is the Jacqueline Bardsley Poet-in-Residence at Homerton College, The University of Cambridge, a former Fellow in Creative Practice at University College London and one of the founding editors of bath magg, a magazine which collates the very best new poetry from UK and international poets.*

## Workshop 3

### The Tuna Auction, Tsukiji Market

Excerpt from “The Love I Do to You”, Eyewear Publishing, London 2019.

The last tuna lay on a wooden slat, dead.  
Silver belly split, cow-heavy curves an arch  
corrugated in snow. The meat hissed with cold,  
the ridged place where its gills once were  
stuffed with tarpaulin, head and lunate tail removed.  
Bidding broke like a wave over the hall, the voice  
of the auctioneer scouring the concrete floor  
thick with venous fish-slurry — my feet disturbing  
a hot froth of blood, bleach and steam  
escaping from opened bodies. Afterwards,  
the ice-cured haunch was almost close enough  
to touch — its frost-coat steamed like a prayer,  
whispered how the tuna had once swum  
chandelier-bright in the Pacific, succumbing  
to its hot urges to seed the blue with its sperm or eggs  
— who could tell from the bloody absence of its sex?

### Description

Bringing together the themes of sustainability and free speech, we will explore how to write eco-poetry. Not simply ‘nature poetry’, eco-poetry investigates the relationship between nature, culture and language. How do we write poems that are interested in nature in its own right? Is it okay to write poems that speak on behalf of the natural world? How can we centre the natural environment within our poetry?

# Programme

European Alliance of Academies & Homerton College conference  
**On Freedom of Artistic Expression in Literature in the 21st Century**

Censorship has many forms. Who has the power to raise their voice? And who can silence other voices? Freedom of artistic expression is increasingly under attack in some countries in Europe. What does that mean for our democracies? And how can the European community create sustainable networks that can act in solidarity in times of need? Writers from the European Alliance of Academies – a network of 70 art academies and cultural institutions – explore the mechanisms of state censorship and its impact on artistic creation.

With **Bianca Bellová, Réka Borda, Ferenc Czinki, Bhanu Kapil, Kenan Malik, Daljit Nagra, Annelies Verbeke, Marina Warner, Cécile Wajsbrot, Mariah Whelan**

A project by European Alliance of Academies. Initiated by Royal Society of Literature and Akademie der Künste, in cooperation with Homerton College/Cambridge University.

It was supported by authors from Czech Literary Centre, Royal Academy of Dutch Language and Literature and Society of Hungarian Authors.

## Saturday, 26 August

5.00 – 6.30pm  
North Wing Auditorium

Public Discussion

“How does self-censorship work for a writer?”  
with **Réka Borda, Bianca Bellová, Ferenc Czinki, Marina Warner**

At a time of rising tension between the freedom of the artist and counter voices across Britain and Europe, this panel discuss the extent to which writers are limited in their creative expression. What responsibilities writers must consider while being aware that freedom of expression is becoming an increasingly politicised activity at a time of increasing extremism.

Moderator: **Daljit Nagra**

8.30  
The Griffin Bar

Café Climate

“Café Climate” is an open space format designed to encourage discussions and exchanges about the climate crisis and emergency. We sit all of us in small groups as in a café to exchange upon various issues.

Moderator: **Cécile Wajsbrot**



# Sunday, 27 August

11.30 – 12.15 pm  
Upstairs Meeting Room

## Workshop 1

“And what would you say if you could?” with **Bhanu Kapil**

In this workshop, we will engage this question as part of a proprioceptive writing practice that will include reflection on art making itself as a place or site of liberation. Come with a notebook or device to write with. Writers from all genres are welcome.

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11.30 – 12.15 pm  
Drawing Room

## Workshop 2

“Conversation with my inexperienced self” with **Bianca Bellová**

What would I as an experienced author tell my younger inexperienced self? What matters the most, what are the shortcuts and what should I avoid when writing?

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14.00 – 14.45 pm  
Upstairs Meeting Room

## Workshop 3

“Writing eco-poetry” with **Mariah Whelan**

Bringing together the themes of sustainability and free speech, in two interlinked workshops we will explore how to write eco-poetry. Not simply ‘nature poetry’, eco-poetry investigates the relationship between nature, culture and language. How do we write poems that are interested in nature in its own right? Is it okay to write poems that speak on behalf of the natural world? How can we centre the natural environment within our poetry?

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14.00 – 14.45 pm  
Drawing Room

## Workshop 4

“Looking at yourself” with **Annelies Verbeke**

A talk about touching the subjects of racism and sexism, looking at yourself, and why it’s liberating to write from an animal perspective every now and then.

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4.00 – 5.30 pm  
North Wing Auditorium

## Public Discussion

„Who has the right to speak? Whose voice is heard?”  
with **Annelies Verbeke, Kenan Malik, Cécile Wajsbrot**

Does freedom of speech mean that all values are articulated and given equal platform? Or are we witnessing across Britain and Europe in our daily politics, online and in our literature that certain values are given greater publicity than others? The panel will consider how certain communities feel under-represented, and, as in certain Europe countries right now, to extent to which authors are being silenced.

Moderator: **David Whitley**

## Imprint

The programme On Freedom of Artistic Expression in Literature in the 21st Century is initiated and organized by the European Alliance of Academies and takes place in co-operation with Homerton College/Cambridge University.

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AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE



HOMERTON COLLEGE  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE



The Royal Society  
of Literature

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