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Freedom's Limit? Core Values in a Changing World

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Panel: Freedom's Limits? Core Values in a Changing World

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Freedom's Limit? Core Values in a Changing World

Thinking about this topic has been, for me, challenging and chastening.

Challenging because I wonder sometimes what the role of the writer actually is, and while I believe that literature has a fundamental role in any society, I suspect my job as a writer is to write my own version of my own truths rather than make public pronouncements about “core values.” (If the one reveals something about the other, then of course that’s fine.)

Preparing to talk about freedom has been chastening because of what I’ve learned over the past weeks about the experiences my colleagues and friends here on the IWP have had in their home countries.

I am lucky. I live in Scotland, in the UK. The worst thing that can happen to me as a writer is that I get a bad review. I might take to the bottle – hell, I might even take to my bed – but the next day, I’ll be back at my desk, Alka Seltzer in hand, trying to write something else, something better. Many authors are familiar with the hangover; I know some who are extremely badly-behaved. I’ve also read poems that are, quite frankly, criminal.

But no matter how obnoxious the author or bad the poetry, these are writers flexing their human right to freedom of expression. Some of them are writing books that make people see the world differently, and some of them are writing books that make people angry. We all share the right to “to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

As most of you will know, PEN is the only international organisation of writers. Since my first novel was published in 2002, I’ve worked a great deal with the Scottish PEN centre. We strive to defend freedom of expression and to promote literature across frontiers. We campaign for individual writers overseas and support writers in exile in Scotland, and we’ve been very happy to see some of those writers released or granted leave to remain in the UK. Our work is necessary: there are many places in the world where writers are imprisoned, tortured and murdered simply for expressing their thoughts and ideas. Last year PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee monitored over 730 cases of attacks against writers, journalists, publishers and others in eighty-one countries. Thirty-nine of those writers were killed, and 219 are serving long prison terms. Eleven have “disappeared.”

It is my belief that when our colleagues overseas are denied their basic human right of freedom of expression, our own artistic freedom is compromised.

While I am lucky to be able to write with fear of nothing but the blank page, I’m aware that this sense of freedom may be to an extent a veneer. In the UK we’ve learned that we can be sentenced to imprisonment for the books that we own and convicted on the basis of the 140 characters that make up a tweet.

In 2007, Samina Malik became the first woman to be convicted under “anti-terror” legislation. Styling herself as the “lyrical terrorist,” she was charged

not for her poetry but for books in her possession that might be useful to someone planning terrorist activity. Malik's conviction was overturned in 2008. But last year, Paul Chambers lost his appeal against a conviction for sending the following tweet: "Crap! Robin Hood airport is closed. You've got a week and a bit to get your shit together otherwise I'm blowing the airport sky high!"

After disseminating these 106 characters to his 600 or so followers, Chambers had his iPhone, laptop and desktop hard drive confiscated during a search of his house that he described as "terrifying and humiliating." He ended up with a criminal record and liable for fines and legal fees.¹

These cases were widely reported in the media and attracted a great deal of attention, but the press in Britain is increasingly beleaguered. The reasons are economic and legal. A 2009 Index on Censorship and PEN analysis of (English) libel laws concluded that "The law as it stands is hindering the free exchange of ideas and information," and the 2011 Global Press Freedom Rankings placed the UK only in joint 26th place. Last week the editor of the Guardian newspaper, Alan Rusbridger, wrote that "there can never be a moment when freedom can be considered 'won.'"

That vigilance necessary in the UK seems to be present here in the US too. At the end of September we saw Banned Books Week promoted in Prairie Lights. This is an annual campaign that stresses the importance of ensuring the availability of "unorthodox or unpopular" viewpoints for all who wish to read and access them.

Once again, I noticed that the book that provoked the most challenges recorded by the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom was a charming children's story called *And Tango Makes Three*.² It's a picture book based on the true story of two male penguins who hatched and raised a chick in Central Park Zoo.

This reminds me again of how much I value my personal freedom, to live openly in a same sex relationship. And it reminds me that many people in the world would presume to find my life and my relationship abhorrent.

I dislike the idea of labelling people - writers included! - in any way, but the hatred and violence that LGBTI people and indeed women suffer worldwide confer a kind of responsibility on me, I think, to be open about my sexuality and my feminism. Which makes a perfect example of why labelling can make me uncomfortable: I'm not really talking about women's rights or gay rights - I'm talking about human rights.

Freedom seems like an absolute; you're either free or you're not, surely? I'm not sure that's true. At home, to a great extent I am able to choose my level of freedom, to what extent I'll adhere to a social contract. For many of my colleagues, that isn't possible. So however much the world changes, it is

¹ Chambers was arrested for making a bomb threat, but convicted under a section of the Communications Act that states, "a person is guilty of an offence if he sends by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character."

² By Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson

important to me that I continue trying to voice my own truths in whatever way I can.