

# Ten Evenings 2022-23 Program Book

## Executive Director's Note

Dear Friends,

What an absolute honor to share these ten distinguished contemporary authors with you as we gather for a season of in-person events. It is surely a time of much needed joy and a time to revel in the art of well-crafted words and well-told stories.

In her TED Talk entitled "Why People Need Poetry," literary critic Stephanie Burt asserts that poetry can...  
help us want to be alive  
bring us together  
help us slow down  
show us we are not alone  
introduce us to ways of being  
in the world  
show us what it's like to be  
another person  
show us what it means  
to be human.

While four of this year's celebrated authors are poets, all of the literary works represented on this year's roster are reflective of Burt's list. They help us want to be alive!

Clint Smith's *How The Word Is Passed* "brings us together" in understanding, in his insightful examination of the legacy of slavery in America and how history has shaped our lives.

Poet, essayist, and cultural critic Hanif Abdurraqib "helps us slow down" as we take time to absorb and praise the cultural importance and joyous moments of Black performance in *A Little Devil in America*.

Patricia Lockwood's *No One Is Talking About This*, her meditation on love, language, and human connection, "shows us that we are not alone." As does Anthony Doerr with *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, where he binds us and his characters across the ages with the love of a good story.

Ruth Ozeki's *The Book of Form and Emptiness* introduces us to "ways of being in the world" with themes of grief and loss, neurodiversity, hoarding, and climate change.

The fiction of Abdulrazak Gurnah (*Afterlives*) and Hanya Yanagihara (*To Paradise*) profiles exiles and outsiders seeking to find love, showing us "what it's like to be another person." As do the portrayals of the flawed humans in the nonfiction works of Patrick Radden Keefe (*Rogues*) and Candice Millard (*River of the Gods*).

And U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo's collection *Weaving Sundown in a Scarlet Light* shows us "what it means to be human" through her poetry of compassion and healing, truth and justice.

With gratitude for these writers and their work,  
Stephanie

Stephanie Flom  
Executive Director  
Pittsburgh Arts & Lectures

### [Abdulrazak Gurnah - Thursday, September 15, 2022](#)

Abdulrazak Gurnah was introduced to writing while growing up on the island of Zanzibar, now part of Tanzania, in the 1950s. As a student, Gurnah looked forward to writing assignments and trying “to retrieve something worth reporting from memory and imagination,” he wrote on the Nobel Prize website in 2021.

“Gurnah’s dedication to the truth and his aversion to simplification are striking,” wrote Anders Olsson, chairman of the Swedish Academy, when announcing Gurnah’s award. “This can make him bleak and uncompromising, at the same time as he follows the fates of individuals with great compassion and unbending commitment.”

Gurnah emigrated to England in 1968 and studied at Christ Church College Canterbury and the University of Kent. After publishing *Memory of Departure*, he became a noted writer, if not one of widespread popularity.

When asked by Annabel Gutterman for *TIME* magazine if the Nobel Prize conferred celebrity status, Gurnah replied, “I felt like enough of a celebrity before.” “I have loyal readers who have been reading my books for many years, and I was quite comfortable with that,”

Gurnah told Gutterman in 2022. “But this is global. People all over the world know about it, whether they are readers or not. The thing that’s been most amazing is the number of publishers across the world who want to publish the books in their own languages.”

Gurnah’s books explore identity, exile, and loss. In *The Last Gift* (2011), a former merchant sailor from East Africa suffers a series of strokes, compelling him to tell his children stories from his life. An English immigrant from Tanzania reveals to a woman his past and the racism he’s encountered in his new homeland in *Pilgrim’s Way*. And in 1997’s *Gravel Heart*, Gurnah writes about a teenager who has left Africa for England to study literature.

One theme Gurnah feels strongly about is the idea that exiles become confused in new environments. In a 2022 interview with Michael Cronin for the *Irish Times*, Gurnah rebutted the idea that non-Europeans lose something after being immersed in European society or culture.

“This is a kind of hubristic notion, it seems to me, that European culture or knowledge is so complex that it can only overwhelm the person encountering it, who then doesn’t know where he is,” Gurnah said. “Is he really who he was, or is he now someone else? I think it’s a load of rubbish, really. It may be overwhelming but not, probably, forever.”

Gurnah’s native tongue is Swahili, but his books have been written in English. He told Annabelle Steffes-Halmer, writing for *Deutsche Welle* in 2022, that the simple answer for his choice of language is “because I wanted to.”

But Gurnah also admitted that English is the language that, by chance, he learned and felt at ease with. “Swahili was given to me because of the way I was brought up, and I am very grateful for that,” Gurnah said. “When it came to writing, I didn’t really think about what language I wanted to write in. I kind of understood and knew

that I had an intimate connection and relationship with the way I used English that I didn't quite have in writing Swahili. People who are writing in Swahili do things with a language that I don't know how to do.

"These are not always choices. People do not choose to be writers. It's not just a matter of putting words together. It's a matter of having a real kind of connection and intimate feel for language that, it seems to me, is what makes writing. And I had that and I was grateful for it."

### [Anthony Doerr - Monday, October 3, 2022](#)

The contrasting elements of Anthony Doerr's latest novel, *Cloud Cuckoo Land*, initially seem like excerpts from random encyclopedia entries. One plot strand is set in 15th-century Constantinople. Another tangent takes place in contemporary Idaho. And a third occurs on a spaceship fleeing earth.

But Doerr magically interlocks the elements into a gorgeous mosaic that showcases his knack for inventive, wondrous storytelling.

Doerr told Gal Beckerman for the *New York Times* in 2021 that the premise for *Cloud Cuckoo Land* came to him after studying Constantinople, which during its thousand-year existence was a center of learning and home to numerous libraries.

"I think art is another way to try to exercise your imagination at connecting incongruous things," Doerr said. "It's a way to say, 'Hey, reader, let's work together and practice and train our imagination to connect things that you don't readily think of as connected.' And then that maybe becomes a little bit political, because I think the solution going forward is we need to have a much more planetary perspective."

The winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 2015 for his novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr was born and raised near Cleveland, Ohio, and currently lives in Idaho. His interest in fiction, specifically short stories, was forged growing up in rural Ohio where writers seemed to be "a rare and exalted species. I figured I had as much of a chance of growing up to be one as I did of growing up to be a blue whale," Doerr wrote in an essay for *Literary Hub* in 2019.

"Yet I wrote. I wrote a nine-page book about snails titled *Mollusks* (riveting) and typed stories about my Playmobil pirates on my mother's typewriter, primarily for the pleasure of typing swear words, then frantically covering them up with gobs of Wite-Out."

Doerr has won five O. Henry Prizes for short stories and essays. His debut novel, *About Grace* (2004), was sandwiched between two short-story collections — *The Shell Collector* (2002) and *Memory Wall* (2010).

Then came his second novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, which not only earned the Pulitzer Prize, but also became a global bestseller. Doerr weaved the story of a blind French girl forced to flee Paris during World War II with that of a young German soldier conscripted into an elite Nazi training school. They inevitably cross paths around the search for an exotic blue diamond, the *Sea of Flames*.

The genesis of *All the Light We Cannot See* came to Doerr while riding a train when a passenger started complaining about losing cellphone coverage.

"I had my notebook open in my lap when this guy got angry, embarrassingly so for him, about his phone," Doerr told John Wilkins for the *San Diego Union-Tribune* in 2014.

“I thought he was taking this magic for granted. We all are. I’m talking to you right now, you’re a thousand miles south, we’re using little shapes of light to send our words back and forth at the speed of light, cascading between relay towers. That day I wrote the title down in my junky little notebook, *All the Light We Cannot See*.”

The ensuing acclaim — and winning one of most prestigious literary prizes — ostensibly didn’t change Doerr’s everyday life. He told Sean Hooks for the *LA Review of Books* that prior to the publication of *All the Light We Cannot See*, his days consisted of “picking up dirty socks around the house and telling my kids to put the milk back in the fridge, and most days after found me picking up dirty socks around the house and telling my kids to put the milk back in the fridge. The main difference seems to be that the kids’ socks have gotten larger.”

Nor has Doerr’s mission changed. He told Hooks that he wants to write stories in the same vein as those that inspire him.

“I want to be challenged by art; I want to be reminded of the horrors humans can commit, or to be reminded that other human cultures value material possessions totally differently than we do,” Doerr said. “I want art that reawakens in me the sensation of being alive. I read an interview with Jhumpa Lahiri a little while ago where she said, ‘I am perplexed by the notion that literature should not distress the reader.’ I wholeheartedly agree.

“That said, I recognize that, for pretty much every day of my life, I have had a halfway decent roof over my head and a halfway decent meal to look forward to. It’s an immense privilege to be comfortable enough to occasionally seek out discomfort through literature.”

### [Candice Millard - Monday, October 24, 2022](#)

Candice Millard thought she was going to die.

She was in a small plane flying over a village in Brazil doing research on a 1914 expedition led by Teddy Roosevelt in the Amazon. Why, Millard wondered, had Roosevelt and his party almost starved when the ecosystem was rich in game and he was an accomplished hunter?

Millard told Gina Kaufmann for KCUR in Kansas City that she was trying to get “a sensory feel” for what Roosevelt and his party experienced. But the day of her flight was rainy, the pilot was inexperienced, and the plane had not been properly prepped before the flight.

“We were about 1,500 feet up,” Millard told Kaufmann in 2017, “and if you’ve been in a little plane, you know it’s loud and shaky, and then all the sudden it’s just silent and we drop like a stone.”

Fortunately, the pilot was able to restart the engine. But the trip is indicative of Millard’s exhaustive and meticulous research, resulting in atypical, unique looks at history.

Formerly a writer and editor with *National Geographic*, Millard is the author of books on Winston Churchill, Chester A. Arthur, and Theodore Roosevelt. *Destiny of the Republic* (2011), about the short presidency of James A. Garfield, won an Edgar Award in 2012 for Best Fact Crime Book, and a PEN Center USA Award.

In 2017, Biographers International Organization gave Millard its 2017 BIO Award for the biographies of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Garfield.

Millard’s preparation is comprehensive. She starts by spending a year doing nothing but research, visiting libraries, museums, and sites. Next, she pores over the material she’s gathered, “trying to absorb it, understand it and organize it,” she told Jan Hoops for the *Clarion Ledger* in 2016.

“During that time, which takes at least another year, I always find holes in my research, so I do more digging. I don’t begin writing until I’ve been working on a book for two or three years.”

Most of Millard’s research doesn’t put her life in peril but it can take her to exotic locations. For *Hero of the Empire: The Boer War, a Daring Escape, and the Making of Winston Churchill*, Millard researched a little-known episode in the British statesman’s life: Churchill’s incarceration in a South African prison camp while working as a journalist for a newspaper.

Millard told Brian Lamb of C-SPAN that, in order to get a feel for Churchill’s experiences, she spent several weeks traveling to locales where Churchill had been, including where he was captured and kept as a prisoner of war in Pretoria.

“The building is now a public library,” Millard told Lamb in 2017. “I stood in the trapdoor in the floor of his room where he had thought about tunneling his way out. I went to where he was hiding in a coal mine shaft with white rats. And I went into what is now Mozambique, but was Portuguese East Africa, and they still have the same building that was the British Consulate, where he went when he was finally a free man.”

*Destiny of the Republic* was conceived when Millard was researching Alexander Graham Bell. In a talk with John Haskell, director of the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress in 2019, Millard found that Bell had invented a device called an induction balance that he used to try to remove the bullet from Garfield after he was assassinated.

After the assassination, Garfield suffered an infection from inexcusably poor treatment. Bell was keen on trying to find the bullet that was lodged in the president, using the induction balance, a type of metal detector. What was forgotten until then was that the inventor had made numerous prototypes of the device, which were stored in the Smithsonian.

“They’re every shape and size, and there are wires hanging off of them,” Millard said. “And you hold them, and you can just feel his mind racing and his heart beating, and he’s trying to figure out how to save the life of the president of the United States.”

Millard’s latest book, *River of the Gods: Genius, Courage, and Betrayal in Search of the Source of the Nile*, about the rivalry between Royal Geographical Society explorers Richard Burton and John Hanning Speke, was published in May 2022.

### [Clint Smith - Monday, November 7, 2022](#)

When Clint Smith was growing up in New Orleans in the 1990s and early 2000s, there were reminders of the South’s antebellum past everywhere. He told Terry Gross for NPR’s *Fresh Air* that his route to school took him past Robert E. Lee Boulevard. To get to the grocery store, he used Jefferson Davis Highway.

There were school field trips to plantations where the word “slavery” was never used. Instead of explanations about the links to Lee or Davis, other lessons were emphasized.

“We were inundated with messages that New Orleans was the murder capital of the nation ... that there was a culture of violence, a culture of a pathology that was so deeply embedded in the city,” Smith told Gross in 2021 while talking about his book, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*.

“You know that the things that this country is telling you about your community and about people who look like you are wrong, but you don’t necessarily have the language or the history with which to explain it.”

Smith, a staff writer with The Atlantic, is a graduate of Davidson College with a Ph.D. in education from Harvard. His poems and other writing have appeared in The New Yorker, The New Republic, and The Paris Review. Counting Descent, his debut poetry collection, was published in 2017.

For How the Word Is Passed, Smith visited nine places attempting to understand how history and slavery are reconciled. His first visit, to Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation in Virginia, unlocked many of the themes he would write about in other chapters.

At Monticello, Smith realized that Jefferson "embodies and personifies so many of the contradictions, and so much of the hypocrisy, and so much of the cognitive dissonance of America," he told Jamil Smith for Vox in 2021, "in a sense that America is a place that has provided unparalleled, unimaginable, unfathomable opportunities to millions of people across generations to achieve upward mobility and accumulate wealth in ways that their ancestors could have never imagined. But it has done so at the direct expense of millions and millions of other people who have been intergenerationally subjugated and oppressed."

His stops also included the Blandford Cemetery of Confederate Soldiers in Petersburg, Virginia; Gorée Island and the House of Slaves in Senegal; and the Whitney Plantation in Wallace, Louisiana, about an hour from New Orleans.

In a conversation with Min Jin Lee for the Harvard Book Store in 2021, Smith said after realizing that so much of New Orleans' iconography was devoted to the Confederacy, he started to explore why so many streets, buildings, and highways bore the names of men devoted to the cause of slavery.

"It was with the specific intention of distorting their legacy, and to mold their legacy in a way that was much more favorable than the reality of the project they were tied to," Smith told Lee. "The Confederacy is, by historical fact, grounded in primary source documents, a treasonous territory that seceded from the United States and raised an army predicated on maintaining and expanding the institution of slavery. And the insidiousness of white supremacy is it turns that statement from an empirical one into an ideological one."

Smith also took his grandparents to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. It was at the museum that he realized his grandfather, born in 1930 in Mississippi, and grandmother, born in Florida in 1939, had directly witnessed the aftershocks of slavery.

"When I spoke to my grandmother, she had this refrain when I asked her about our trip to the museum," Smith told Gross for NPR. "She was just like, 'I lived it. I lived it. I lived it.' Like, she was looking around and realizing that so much of what she was seeing, she lived through it and experienced it directly. And I had spent these years working on this book, interviewing strangers and going into the archives and thinking about primary source documents and asking people I just met their life story and what their relationship to the history of slavery was — and I realized I had never been as intentional in doing so with my own family."

[Patrick Radden Keefe - Monday, December 12, 2022](#)

Patrick Radden Keefe's versatility - he's a staff writer with The New Yorker and a nonfiction author - is evident in the topics he explores.

Keefe has penned magazine articles about the relationship between director Ron Howard and chef José Andrés; Wall Street whistleblowers; and the Mexican drug lord El Chapo. His books include Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland and Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty.

Keefe told Sean O'Hagan for *The Guardian* in 2022 that *Say Nothing* and *Empire of Pain* are typical of the stories that draw his interest.

"There are definitely certain themes I am interested in and seem to return to," Keefe said. "One is the notion that some— one can have an ideal that they relentlessly pursue, or a theory that they plunge headlong into, and it turns out that they were wrong. Either they were wrong about what the end would be, or they were wrong about the means and what it would cost. What I'm really fascinated by is what happens to them when they start getting these indications that they are wrong. What do they do?"

Keefe began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2006, specializing in investigative fiction. His awards include a National Magazine Award for Feature Writing in 2014, a National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction in 2019 for *Say Nothing*, and the 2021 Baillie Gifford Prize for Nonfiction for *Empire of Pain*.

During an interview with John Burnham Schwartz at the Sun Valley Writers' Conference via Lit Hub, Keefe said that his work tries to balance reporting and storytelling.

"It's always interesting to me to think about the relationship between the two, where on the one hand, you want to write a story that has a kind of novelistic flow to it and hopefully novelistic structure, where you engage with these people and really come to understand them as characters and feel — in a book like this [*Empire of Pain*] — an accumulating sense of tragedy in the story," Keefe said. "At the same time, as a nonfiction writer who has to endnote everything scrupulously, you're at the mercy of the material, right? The story will only be as good as what you can dig up and substantiate."

That process of researching a story can be daunting. In a talk for Goldman Sachs in 2019, Keefe said the research he did for *Say Nothing* required unearthing memories that have long been buried.

"I made seven trips over to Northern Ireland," Keefe said, "and was knocking on doors and interviewing people and what I encountered was a kind of a wall of silence — that there was a sense that these things are better not discussed. You do have peace now, but I think a lot of people feel like the price of peace is silence, that it's better not to look back at the things that happened in the past. And so, for me as a reporter, that's a huge challenge."

The genesis of *Empire of Pain* was a *New Yorker* article Keefe wrote in 2017 about the Sackler family, the owners of Purdue Pharma, the pharmaceutical company that helped fuel the opioid crisis. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, Purdue Pharma paid a federal settlement of more than \$8 billion and was forced to dissolve and repurpose its assets entirely for the public's benefit.

Keefe told Katie MacBride for *Inverse* in 2021 that the story generated more mail than any article he'd previously written, with many responses coming from people who'd lost family members to opioid addiction.

"Most of the books that have been written about the opioid crisis have a tendency to kind of cut away to another character, and then you follow them through the book," Keefe told MacBride. "I wanted to take a different approach, which was to show that these people are everywhere, that you never have to go very far to find someone whose life has been upended by the drug." Keefe's latest book, *Rogues: True Stories of Grifters, Killers, Rebels and Crooks*, was published in June 2022. A compendium of some of his most notable articles, it features stories about the forging of vintage wines, a black-market arms merchant, and an interview with the late Anthony Bourdain in Vietnam.

## Patricia Lockwood - Monday, February 20, 2023

When Patricia Lockwood started writing poetry, she abstained from mentioning McDonald's or any other common name that might not be viable in 500 years. During an interview with Rosa Lyster for *Hazlitt* in 2021, Lockwood said that idea was merely an "exaggerated sense of your own longevity in the historical mind."

Books, Lockwood added, are serious things, and the goal of writing for immortality is natural. But why not apply that same standard to the internet?

"I don't know why it took us so long to incorporate the internet in our work," Lockwood told Lyster. "This is how we're talking to people. We're not chatting with them on the phone, necessarily. We're texting them or emailing them. So why do we want to have it look different in our books? We think it's like Jane Austen is going to get mad."

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Lockwood is considered one of contemporary literature's most ground-breaking writers. In 2022, the American Academy of Letters awarded her the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award for contributions to experimental writing.

Lockwood also was awarded the 2017 Thurber Prize for American Humor for the memoir *Priestdaddy*, and the Dylan Thomas Prize in 2022 for her first novel, *No One Is Talking About This*.

Dylan Thomas Prize juror Alan Bilton said the novel was "inventive, smart, and hyper-self-aware," and called Lockwood "the patron saint of digital natives, an explorer who has navigated the Twittersphere and knows: 'Here There Be Monsters.'"

Lockwood published her debut poetry collection, *Balloon Pop Outlaw Black*, in 2012. When her poem *Rape Joke* was published in 2013 via the website *Awl*, it went viral and earned her a larger readership. A reaction to a controversial joke by comedian Daniel Tosh, the poem details Lockwood's own rape and generated intense internet discourse.

"I think I'm walking a fine line there, and I think it's provocative in that sense," she told the United Kingdom's *4 News* in 2017. "But I go back and read it now and it's funnier than I remember. I will be reading and think, 'These are some very zingy lines.' I do think there are parts of the poem that you can actually laugh out loud at. But at the same time, the tone is very confrontational, and it asks you to think about what it means when you do laugh."

Lockwood combined childhood stories and a short period when she moved back in with her parents in *Priestdaddy* (2017). The memoir recounts her contentious childhood, notably her father converting to Catholicism and becoming a priest after marrying and starting a family, and his conservative tendencies.

Lockwood thought she could walk the necessary tightrope between the humor and pathos of her stories, she told Kristin Iverson for *Nylon* in 2017. "I knew that there was going to be a question of whether I could balance that as much as a reader would want me to," Lockwood said. "Because, for me, I'm happy to have a book be incongruous and jump from subject to subject, but I knew that if I wanted to reach people from a wider audience, I had to really smooth those things out or weave them together."

In *No One Is Talking About This* (2021), she again explored the new methods of storytelling, writing about an unnamed social media star who refers to the internet as "the portal" and seems to alternately loathe and embrace its omnipresence.



In an interview with Adrienne Westenfeld for *Esquire*, Lockwood said she wanted the novel to have an Alice in Wonderland quality, evoking the disorientation Alice felt when she fell down the rabbit hole.

“If you’re going to write a novel about the internet, I think it has to take that form,” Lockwood told Westenfeld in 2021. “It has to have that shock of surprise of the next thing you encounter being totally unexpected. It was a really interesting formal challenge, but it was the only way to do it. It’s both an amazing innovation on my part and also totally inevitable.”

### [Ruth Ozeki - Monday, March 13, 2023](#)

Growing up in New Haven, Connecticut, in the 1960s, Ruth Ozeki had a hard time finding her voice. Because her mother was Japanese and her father white, she was bullied and felt out of place.

It wasn’t until Ozeki was 13 and started hanging out at the New Haven Green, where counterculture groups such as the Black Panthers, the SDS, and the Weatherman gathered, that she realized that her voice was important.

“That was the first time that I’d seen people of color, you know, asserting themselves in that way,” Ozeki told Helen Shaw for *Vulture* in 2021. “I wasn’t Black, so I couldn’t really fit in there either. But I wasn’t white. There was a sense that ‘Oh, I don’t have to just be quiet and passive.’”

Ozeki is a Zen Buddhist priest and filmmaker in addition to being a novelist, essayist, and poet, and her talents transfer easily to various mediums. Her directorial debut, 1994’s *Body of Correspondence*, won a New Vision Award at the San Francisco Film Festival. Her debut novel, *My Year of Meats*, won a Kiriya Prize for books about the Pacific Rim and South Asia in 1998. Her novel *A Tale for the Time Being* was honored with the 2015 Yasnaya Polyana Award for the best foreign novel of the 21st century.

Ozeki’s approach to writing is consistent, no matter the form. In a 2016 interview with Melody J. Nixon for *Electric Literature*, Ozeki said that whether she’s writing fiction or a “memoirish essay,” she’s always tapping into her body’s memory “to enter the writing through the senses, and through the body.

“If we’re able to do that then the writing itself becomes embodied. We are all human bodies; for the writer to be able to enter a scene or a piece of prose that way I think necessarily invokes a similar response in the reader. I’ve always written with the idea that writing is not just something one does with the mind, that you have to write embodied prose in order to elicit the same kinds of strong, physical, emotional responses from the reader.”

Ozeki does approach writing fiction from a slightly different perspective. She told Haley Cunningham for *Hazlitt* in 2021 that fiction requires her to assume a condition that is “analogous to a dream–state, and that somehow the workings of the unconscious are what produces the story. And so, as much as possible, to try to get the conscious mind out of the way, and to tap that dream–state, is really the desirable place to be if I want to write. So, whatever it takes to get there is useful to me.”

Ozeki’s latest novel, *The Book of Form and Emptiness* (2021), is about Benny Oh, a boy of 13 who starts to hear voices after his father dies. And not just any voices, but those of inanimate objects — a sneaker, coffee beans, windows — as his mother, also grieving and struggling to keep the family intact, starts to hoard snow globes, kitchenware, and other objects.

*The Book of Form and Emptiness* has been shortlisted for literary awards that include the 2022 Women’s Prize for Fiction and the 2022 Ethel Wilson Prize, part of the B.C. and Yukon Book Prizes. In a review of *The Book of Form and Emptiness* for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, David Palumbo–Lin wrote, “There has never been a

more timely novel. ... Ozeki sees the real dangers of fascism, bureaucratic and political paralysis, and environmental disaster not on the horizon, but before our very eyes.”

During an interview with Susie Measure, Ozeki noted that she started to write the book with an omniscient narrator. But after 50 pages, she switched to the first– person voice of Benny. The reason? The concept of omniscience clashed with Ozeki’s spirituality.

“I don’t believe in a monolithic, all–seeing god,” Ozeki said. “I’m mixed–race. I perceive everything as being fractured or multiplicitous; maybe that’s why I see everything from multiple points of view.”

### Joy Harjo - Monday, March 27, 2023

In 2016, Bob Dylan was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first time a musician was bestowed the prestigious honor. Controversy ensued. Many critics were aghast that a musician — even one as accomplished as Dylan — was perceived worthy of perhaps the most prestigious global prize in literature.

Joy Harjo undoubtedly disagrees with such critics. When named the first artist–in–residence of the Bob Dylan Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in January 2020, Harjo released a statement lauding the legendary musician’s influence on her work.

“When Bob Dylan stepped forward and made his path of song–making, poetry, and storytelling — a path that lit a generation — he opened a creative door for others to find their way to fresh invention and imagining,” Harjo wrote. “I am one of those who followed. My residency will allow this legacy to be extended to the community, to encourage and share creativity. I am honored to be part of this new venture.”

Harjo’s body of work is just as influential, and certainly as pro– found, as Dylan’s oeuvre. A Tulsa native, Harjo — her last name means so brave, you’re crazy — is a member of the Mvskoke Nation and belongs to Oce Vpofv (Hickory Ground).

She is the second poet and the first woman to serve three terms as U.S. Poet Laureate, and the first Native American. Her honors include American Book Awards for the poetry collection *In Mad Love and War* (1990) and the memoir *Crazy Brave* (2014), which also received the PEN USA Award for Creative Nonfiction.

In an interview with Jane Ciabattari for Pen America in 2013, Harjo said that the foundations of her work can be traced to her ancestors, some of whom fought Andrew Jackson at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in what is now Alabama.

“Our tribe was removed unlawfully from our homelands,” Harjo said. “Seven generations can live under one roof. That sense of time brings history close, within breathing distance. I call it ancestor time. Everything is a living being, even time, even words.”

When Harjo was named U.S. Poet Laureate in 2019, one of her goals was to illuminate the works of Native American poets. As editor of *When the Light of the World Was Subdued, Our Songs Came Through*, an anthology of poetry by more than 160 poets from approximately 100 indigenous nations, Harjo took an unusual approach to the revision process.

“At one point in the editing, we decided to read the whole manuscript aloud,” Harjo told Michel Martin of NPR’s *All Things Considered* in 2020. “That’s how I revise, so that’s what we did — we took it into our mouths and took it to our bodies.”

In her work, Harjo emphasizes the role memory plays in poetry. During an interview with James Ricks, Mara Efimov, and Arthur Rodrigues of *Shenandoah* magazine in 2019, she said her impetus to write was the need to “move into the mystery that is just beyond the ordinary sensory. There is everyday language and there is sacred language.”

Everyone, Harjo added, is a memory keeper. But writers, poets, performers, and artists are given the responsibility of being truthful to their subjects, “to carry forth into earth human memory,” she said. “This is one of the things that poetry has taught me. What I’m doing is not just about me sitting down as an individual human writing words, but there is something much larger behind what comes through.

“When I started learning poetry, I was learning Navajo language. To be immersed in that study taught me that everyday language can have a preciseness and exactness that is more than we might consciously know, then the ceremonial language that we use in ritual, in entreaty to the divine, reveals a higher thought, beyond the intellectual. That’s why I was intrigued and drawn to poetry. Memory as an active agent is a large part of it.”

### [Hanif Abdurraqib - Monday, April 17, 2023](#)

In addition to being a writer, poet, and essayist, Hanif Abdurraqib is an observer.

In an interview with Julia Cooper for *Hazlitt* in 2017, Abdurraqib talked about the art of witnessing, and how bearing witness doesn’t preclude joy, even though he finds “the things that are most accessible to us are pain and grief, or fear.”

“We’re in a time where we can watch someone be murdered on a social media feed,” Abdurraqib told Cooper.

“While that is witnessing, witnessing is also sitting on a rooftop after a really good, long hard day and watching the sun go down. Or witnessing someone you love to excel at something. I want to invest in that a little more, because I think once I detach myself from the pain of what I have witnessed, I need to find something to replenish myself. And I think finding joy to both witness and write about is really important.”

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Abdurraqib has become one of the most important and accomplished cultural writers working today. In a 2021 story for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, DJ Lynnee Denise, an artist and scholar, wrote that she can’t read Abdurraqib’s work if she’s writing.

“His writing is annoyingly perfect like that, captivating and confident with intimidating ease,” Denise said. “He ‘chops and screws’ language in a way that grants the rest of us permission to form unique systems of poetic witnessing. He is a cultural witness and a trenchant poet.”

Abdurraqib has published poetry collections (notably *The Crown Ain’t Worth Much* in 2016), the essay collection *They Can’t Kill Us Until They Kill Us* (2017) and *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*, a tribute to hip-hop pioneers.

The recipient of a MacArthur Genius Grant in 2021, Abdurraqib earned widespread acclaim that year with the release of *A Little Devil in America: In Praise of Black Performance*. Featuring a mix of critiques, essays, and personal stories, Abdurraqib explores the work of performers, including Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson, Bernie Mac and Dave Chappelle, and films such as *Green Book* and *New Jack City*.

The book’s title was inspired by a speech given by dancer Josephine Baker at the March on Washington, D.C., in 1963, a landmark event notable for Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Baker had returned to the U.S. after years of exile and noted that many in her native country referred to her as a devil. “And you know

something... why, they are right," Baker told the estimated crowd of 250,00 at the National Mall. "I was too. I was a devil in other countries, and I was a little devil in America too."

Abdurraqib gradually realized that the book needed to have a more celebratory aspect. After a friend sent a hard drive with Soul Train episodes from the 1970s and 1980s, his writing pivoted, the show's performances directing him "to a place of pleasure."

"I decided what I was actually aching for was a book about celebration, about reveling in the many revelations I came towards while watching black people move," he wrote in an essay for *The Guardian* in 2021. "Or when thinking about the joy in black people throwing downplaying cards on a flat surface. Or when thinking about the moment during Gimme Shelter [by the Rolling Stones] when [backup vocalist] Merry Clayton must have felt touched by God, entirely invincible. This was what my actual interests were reaching towards. The idea of celebration without consequence. The type of small performances that, even if they could be mimicked, could never be rightfully done by anyone but us."

### [Hanya Yanagihara - Monday, May 8, 2023](#)

Hanya Yanagihara grew up in Los Angeles, Baltimore, New York, and Hawaii. Moving so much caused a bit of a rift in her family, she told Tanya Sweeney for *The Independent* in 2015, noting that while her father "had a real sense of wanderlust... my mother hated moving."

That nomadic lifestyle was not without benefits.

"For better or worse, I did get to see the world, seeing so many people's lives that you'll never have access to," Yanagihara said, noting that moving so much inspired one of the foundations of her writing philosophy.

"I always think that young writers are being told to write about what they know, but even though that's useful, it's sometimes taken too literally," Yanagihara told Sweeney. "Part of the pleasure of fiction is that you can take an idea about what you think about the world and flesh out the details. With fiction, you are able to go somewhere that your life hasn't yet led you. Travel reminds you of the similarities between people. It broadens your scope and makes you aware of others' stories."

Yanagihara's debut, *The People in the Trees*, was published in 2013. Only 21 when she started working on the novel while employed in Vintage Books' publicity department, Yanagihara kept the project secret for most of the 18 years it took to write.

"I told my best friend, who was my first and only reader, and then I started submitting it to agents in 2011," she told Gabe Habash for *Publishers Weekly* in 2013. "For many years it was just me and the book, year after year, which is horrible, and I don't necessarily recommend."

Yanagihara's second novel, *A Little Life*, took only 18 months to write. The story of four men, opening with them in their 20s and spanning three decades, Yanagihara realized she'd been thinking of the novel since she began collecting photography at the age of 26. She was 40 when the book was published in 2015.

"When I actually began writing, it was these images I returned to, again and again," Yanagihara wrote in 2015 for an essay in *Vulture*. "They provided a sort of tonal sound check, as it were — was I conveying in words and scenes what I felt when I saw these photographs and paintings? Now that the book is done, I realize that these images are now so inextricable from the book — and my experience of writing it — that looking at them again is somehow jolting: They've become a visual diary of that year and a half, and I find myself unable to look at them without thinking of the life of my novel."

After the publication of *A Little Life*, which became a bestseller and was shortlisted for The Booker Prize, Yanagihara decided to take a senior editing job with *T*, The New York Times publication she referred to as “a culture magazine masquerading as a fashion magazine” in an interview with Emme Brockes for *The Guardian* in 2018.

Yanagihara told Brockes that “[s]tyle writing shouldn’t be dumb. It should be done with finesse, but also with as much authority and background as you would have reported a piece about the NSA, or the White House. We are part of a great reportorial institution, and I think style writing has become lumped in with squiffy opinions and laziness.”

Yanagihara’s latest book, *To Paradise* (2022), is again a large (700-plus pages) sweeping novel, spanning 200 years and revealing three alternate versions of America, in the 1890s, the 1990s, and 2093. *To Paradise* sequentially explores societal mores, the AIDS crisis, and a future authoritarian society where personal rights are restricted for the safety of all.

But in an interview with Scott Simon for NPR’s *Weekend Edition Saturday*, Yanagihara said the essence of the story is three outsiders who “are trying to find love because they want to love, and they want to be loved.”

“And one of the things that I was really interested in, especially in the third part of the book, which is a kind of American dystopia, is this idea that no matter how bleak a society is or how totalitarian a regime is or a person’s circumstances, one of the things that we all want as humans is affection and love and to find some beauty in our lives.”