

Ronn Richard Remarks
79th Annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards

Ohio Theatre

Thursday, Sept. 11, 2014

Good evening, my friends, and welcome to the 79th annual Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. I am Ronn Richard, president and CEO of the Cleveland Foundation, and I am thrilled to once again be in the company of Cleveland's most ardent literature lovers.

In this centennial year of the Cleveland Foundation, when the calendar has been packed with so many celebratory events, the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards still stand out and apart. Tonight, these awards will transport us to Israel, Chechnya, Guyana, the Caribbean, and back in time to the America of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

This evening, we continue to honor our covenant with Cleveland Foundation donor Edith Anisfield Wolf in this, the 125th year since her birth. With this prize, she established what I like to think of as the great literary civic commons of Cleveland – and, increasingly, a global crossroads. In this forum, citizens from all walks of life come together around significant literature.

Tonight, our community will demonstrate yet again that we have embraced Edith's appeal to us to grow by reading, reflecting upon and honoring books that shed light on humanity's original sin: racial injustice. As passionate as she was about that great issue of her era and ours, I think she would applaud the gradual expansion of her prize's scope to recognize related forms of injustice as well, including the ethnic and religious hatreds at the core of two of this year's winners.

Our audience, too, expands annually. This year for the first time, it includes high school students from the Fatima Family Center in Cleveland's historic Hough neighborhood, who have focused this summer on the seminal American writer Langston Hughes, a graduate of Cleveland's Central High School and a 1954 Anisfield-Wolf winner.

I would like to ask these students and every first-time attendee at tonight's ceremony to please stand so that we veterans can welcome you into the fold.

Ladies and gentlemen, we meet here as we have before, on a special day of remembrance. For 13 years, we have mourned the losses and lived with the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on America. And yet, each day dawns on the fresh graves of the innocent all over the world. It is hard to envisage any scenario that would curb the human appetite for identifying enemies and seeking to destroy them.

So year after year, we watch scenes of unspeakable human misery play out on our news channels. Two of this year's global hot spots are the Gaza Strip and Ukraine.

How timely it is that tonight, we will hear from one author who examined the ceaseless Israeli-Palestinian bloodletting and a second writer who set his story in Chechnya. That restive former Soviet republic, like Ukraine, bears deep scars from a separatist rebellion.

If there is a connective tissue in this class of 2014, it is this: Each author homes in on the same time-tested strategy for dehumanizing the enemy: Make him or her disappear.

Our fiction winner, Anthony Marra, begins "A Constellation of Vital Phenomena" with a Chechen villager disappeared, his house burned down, his young daughter fled to the forest – just one man among the many neighbors who vanish at the hands of the Russian federalists. Marra's gripping tale opens a long-sealed window on Chechnya, a country that many Americans connect only with the Boston Marathon bombing suspects.

Virulent American racism ensured that black heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, though prominent in the culture a century ago, was "disappeared" in his human complexity. Our poetry winner, Adrian Matejka, has said "The Big Smoke" represents an attempt to bring this opera lover with the knockout punch into the contemporary conversation on race and identity. Matejka has unearthed the man behind the myth.

Johnson could have been the subject of our Lifetime Achievement Award winner, George Lamming, who wrote this passage in his renowned novel, "In the Castle of My Skin":

"I am always feeling terrified of being known; not because they really know you, but simply because their claim to knowledge is a concealed attempt to destroy you. That is what knowing means. As soon as they know you they will kill you, and thank God that's why they can't kill you. They can never know you. The likenesses will meet and make merry, but they won't know you. They won't know the 'you' that's hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin."

Our nonfiction winner, Ari Shavit, wrote simultaneously in English and Hebrew of Israel's imperative to exist weighed against the disappearance of the Arabs living on the land before 1948. The result, "My Promised Land," is a masterstroke of even-handedness, guiding readers toward a more nuanced perception of the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This important book inspired my own decision to set off for Israel, and perhaps Jordan, for the first time next March with a delegation of Clevelanders.

Place, of course, lies at the heart of Shavit's book. It calls to mind our second Lifetime Achievement Award honoree, Sir Wilson Harris, whose insistence on the centrality of landscape in novels like "Palace of the Peacock" weds our identities to place.

Each of these authors holds up a mirror, prodding us toward a greater awareness even when we prefer to look away. They challenge us to see – and, having seen, to think. The act of reading deepens our understanding of suffering, not only of our fellow Americans, but of humankind around the world and through time.

In the Cleveland Foundation's centennial year, a self-effacing woman stands out as the source of one of our most transformational gifts. How prophetic Edith Anisfield Wolf was to see literature itself as a path to social justice!

In her memory, let us shut out the high-tech distractions that surround us and teach our children the intrinsic value of books – even those that don't require a battery. Amid all the pressures of our hectic routines, let us continue to revel in the heart- and mind-expanding joy of reading.

Through the decades, Edith Anisfield Wolf's singular prize has hailed the work of such giants as Toni Morrison, Langston Hughes, Gunnar Myrdal, Nadine Gordimer, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Junot Diaz – often before they reached the pinnacle of their craft with honors like the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for literature.

Tonight, we add Sir Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Anthony Marra, Adrian Matejka and Ari Shavit to the Anisfield-Wolf honor roll. They bring transformational gifts of their own, with the potential to reshape our lives and our world.