

SPEECH TO THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS AGM on November 17 concerning Free Speech.

I am Amanda Craig, I am the author of nine novels and have been a member for over thirty years.

In September 2021 the late, great Carmen Callil resigned as a member of this society, saying: “It is the job of a book publisher and editor to protect all writers, all books, to honour the freedom of speech essential to all writers.” She also asked why the Society of Authors had failed to stand up for all authors.

Freedom of speech and expression is a bedrock principle of the Society. The need to respect a diversity of views is crucial for each and every one of us, and we believe that the Society is currently failing in its duty. A member of the management committee also resigned last year over this failure and its lack of good governance.

Since then, concerns have grown that the Society has failed in its stated mission to create ‘an environment where all are afforded an equal voice.’ Its silence when authors are dropped by agents and publishers for holding views deemed by some to be unpalatable, and its silence in the wake of many requests by members to condemn the online attacks against JK Rowling, despite previously defending the non-member Julian Assange, have helped to fuel increasing intolerance. We believe this has led to a culture of fear that is inimical to writing.

Authors are scared to speak openly about their views. They are right to be scared. Simply standing for this motion has seen us trolled on Twitter as “bigots”. The behaviour of the Society over a tweet by Philip Pullman regarding the action of condemning a book that had not been read was especially reprehensible. Given how the Society then failed to censure its Chair’s flippant response to the assault on Salman Rushdie, and to subsequent death threats to JK Rowling, we question whether it remains impartial.

The Society urgently needs to look at its online social media policy, and the necessary delineation between comments made by individual authors and by those same authors in their representative capacity. Telling its members to “play nicely” in a Tweet this summer as these matters were being debated betrays a patronising view of writers as quarrelling children rather than professionals with serious concerns.

We were horrified to learn the Society seemingly approved the code of conduct enforced on Scottish Book Trust members in which authors who hold views that the Trust deems ‘serious misconduct’ will effectively be blocklisted. They will no longer be invited to speak at schools, literary festivals and libraries.

No author should be dropped by an agent or publisher, or have their contracts cancelled for expressing views that are legal under British law. Publishers, agents, and literary festivals should be in no doubt the Society will uphold the rights of all authors.

The Society also needs be proactive in dealing with the increasing use of compelled sensitivity readers. An author shouldn’t be afraid to explore a character for fear of offending one reader, just as no historical author should be compelled to relay history through the prism of current morality.

We do not condone the persecution of *any* minority - indeed minorities need freedom of speech so that they are not crushed by the majority. All people have the right to be treated equally under Human Rights law, including authors, and that is why we need a trade union that honestly supports us. The true bigots are those who deny plurality and insist on conformity.

So I say to all authors who are waiting to vote: Do not be afraid of fighting for this. Do not feel you owe a debt of gratitude to our Society for granting you money – money that comes from the estates of other authors. When it grants money to needy writers, or when it gives advice on contracts, our union is doing its job. When it takes sides, it is not. Your vote will be anonymous, but it is crucial to freedom of expression. We must stand and fight for our union, and for all writers – including those with whom we may disagree. Otherwise, we are lost.

*This motion was voted 608 to 143 against, out of a membership of approximately 11,000. According to Joanne Harris, it was about transphobia, not free speech.*