



**FSU**  
FREE SPEECH UNION

The Free Speech Union  
85 Great Portland St.  
London W1W 7LT  
[FreeSpeechUnion.org](https://FreeSpeechUnion.org)

Daljit Nagra  
Chair  
Royal Society of Literature  
Somerset House  
Strand  
London  
WC2R 1LA

23<sup>rd</sup> February 2024

To the Council of the Royal Society of Literature:

We are writing to express our concern that, despite your President's recent assertion in the *Guardian* that there is "no question that the current leadership believe in [freedom of speech]", a number of her recent decisions suggest that the RSL is systematically undermining the very principles on which writers' careers – and in some cases their lives – depend. We are particularly concerned by the Society's failure to issue any statement concerning the mobbing and cancellation of Kate Clanchy, and its failure to properly condemn the attempted murder of Salman Rushdie, both fellows of the Society.

We are living through challenging times for writers, both in the UK and across the world. Many have found themselves piled-on, threatened and deprived of their livelihoods by censorious mobs – and a number have been subjected to repeated death threats. Clanchy's career was effectively destroyed by aggressive attacks both on herself and her publisher, and her peers' failure to offer any defence of her freedom to express herself, regardless of their personal views of her book, bodes ill for us all.

As to Rushdie: this distinguished author has had a target on his back since 1989, when the Ayatollah Khomeini offered a £1.5m reward for his murder, and nearly died as a result of an attack last year. But he is far from the only writer to be subjected to death threats.

Writing in the *Guardian* recently, the President dismissed the need to explicitly condemn the attack on Rushdie by claiming the Society "cannot take sides in writers' controversies and issues, but must remain impartial".

According to Dame Marina Warner, former president of the Society, "The official reason given was that speaking up for the rights of a writer to free expression would offend some of our members and fellows and that the RSL is not a political body. This attitude produces the odd situation that one of the few places in the UK where a writer can't express their views is in their own society."

The current President of the Society seems to be under the impression that any forthright defence of those subjected to violence or threats of violence is itself a statement of agreement with those writers' views. While we appreciate that organisations such as yours cannot involve themselves in personal spats, they should defend any members who are subjected to threats, intimidation or violence as a result of something they've written. Far from being "impartial", the Society's failure to properly condemn a violent attack on one of its members is a tacit acknowledgment that it believes there are some circumstances in which trying to murder an author whose work you disapprove of is acceptable. We urge you to ask the President to issue a strong condemnation of this disgraceful assault on freedom of expression. There are some issues on which a Society that believes in free speech should take sides.

Yours sincerely,

**The Free Speech Union's Writers' Advisory Council**

Julie Bindel

Jack Dee

Andrew Doyle

Matthew Hamilton

Helen Joyce

Roger Lewis

Alex Marwood

Bel Mooney

Gillian Philip

Nina Power

Andrew Roberts FRSL

Gareth Roberts

Rachel Rooney

Lionel Shriver

Cc: HM The Queen, Patron, Royal Society of Literature