

From Glimmer Train's 1991 interview with Siobhan, which appeared in issue 3:

Swanson-Davies: Tell us a little about PEN.

Dowd: PEN [Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists] started out as a dining club for writers—a place where writers could begin to talk to people from other countries so there would be an international link between writers. But very soon the notion that PEN should defend freedom of expression became more and more important. PEN won its spurs in the early thirties when it protested the burning of books in Nazi Germany. Throughout PEN history, members defended writers who were in prison like Arthur Koestler and Wole Soyinka, and by 1960, the problems facing writers around the world had become so dramatic that PEN decided to form a Writers in Prison Committee, which would be specifically charged with researching the fate of writers who were faced with censorship and defending them.

How did you get into this work?

I went to Oxford and graduated in 1982, really not having a clue as to what on earth I wanted to do with myself. I felt I wanted to work in the field of literature because I love to read and write... One day I saw an advert in the London *Guardian* newspaper, and I applied for it. It was to work as a researcher for the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN. This was in 1984. My first boss was Michael Scammell, who was then the Chair of the committee. He had been editor of a magazine in London called *Index on Censorship*, and was incredibly professional in his approach to the work. He really knew how to address letters to people, how to hit the right tone, how not to sound too emotionally charged—it's much more effective if you can sound calm and neutral in your letters. He taught me an awful lot and I owe that to him.

So you remain cool in order to be most effective.

I have to say I remember the very first interviews that I had with people who had suffered human-rights abuses, and they were somewhat, well, I found them very disturbing and the bulletins from Amnesty International that landed on my desk had terrible photographs of victims of tortures. I still find that quite disgusting and I don't think anybody in their right mind can remain cool.

I remember the first case I handled—it was a man called Valery Marchenk, who was a Ukrainian writer in a labor camp in the Soviet Union. He died. I had written a case sheet on him, and about six weeks later he was dead. That was the first case of somebody dying and that was upsetting. He was really young. I can't remember precisely his age, but he was in his early forties when he died—it just seemed horrendous. Since then, I've interview3ed people from all over the world and their courage never ceases to amaze me. I mean, I've never lived in a situation where doing the kind of work I do could get me into trouble. I've lived a very safe life.

It sounds as though you were an idealistic youth and you've managed to become very practical as well.

I think that the human-rights movement is a very important one and it's enjoyed, over the last thirty years, a really remarkable degree of success in convincing governments that this is something that they have to attend to. I mean, we know, okay, the U.S. government tends to use the phrase *human*

rights selectively, but I think thirty years ago, it wasn't used at all. Human rights has become an issue, a universal notion that people are embracing.

Do you think there will come a point where the need for this work will go away? Do you foresee that happening and, if so, or if not, then why? What would have to change, what basic tenet would have to change?

I think we'd have to become a much more patient and tolerant human race, which I don't see happening overnight. Idealist though I am, I think that probably a need for our organization will go on indefinitely. However, there have been improvements and it's not all doom and gloom. I think that the more peace and stability that comes to us, the more room there will be for dissenting voices. Also, I think the nature of the threat may change; I think the ways of trying to silence people may change and my worry is that they may, in fact, become less violent, less brutal, but more subtle and therefore harder to actually campaign against. For instance, distribution of books, the decisions as to who publishes what, who has access to what information in, say, a computer system. There are all sorts of ways in which you could prevent sections of a population from having a voice. I think we are a race that's good at finding or inventing new ways of doing these things. I've heard of the way in which paper is distributed in some countries being a form of censorship. Some people claim that illiteracy, or ensuring that the population remains illiterate, is a form of censorship. There is a never-ending range of methods of silencing people.

How can we have an impact against the repression that your organization brings to our attention?

Well, the first thing I would say is that you really *can* have an impact. I have been through days when I sit in my office and feel as though what I do makes no difference, and I get very depressed, but I now believe, and have had this corroborated enough times to be one hundred percent convinced, that letters to governments around the world from ordinary people, letters saying it's unfair that this person has been imprisoned, really do have an effect. Maina wa Kinyatti told me on one occasion that he had been asked to come see the prison director and he was brought to the director's office and shown a whole sack of letters, and the prison director said, *Well, what is this all about? Who the hell are you?* It's quite clear that governments can be very surprised and taken off guard by the response they get. I know that the Malawian poet, Jack Mapanje, said that his government was truly astonished by the level of outrage that his imprisonment caused within the literary community, and it couldn't believe the number of letters that came piling in when he was imprisoned. Jack believes that the fact that he wasn't mistreated in prison, that he was ultimately released, was due in no small part to all those letters...I urge people to write letters—I [now Sara Whyatt, in Siobhan's stead] always give an address at the end of each article...If people can write letters with their own home address on their own letterhead and send them off, it really does have an effect. You should never think that what you are doing ends up in a wastepaper basket. It doesn't. It finds its way to a file and the file begins to bulge and finally—action.

You've been doing this work for quite some time and I would assume that that you will continue for quite some time, but if you were not involved in this, would you still be a writer and what would you be doing?

I hope that I will always be writing things. I love to write both fiction and nonfiction. I find it very difficult to do. I find it hard to sit down with a blank page, but I enjoy doing it and I really like to write about human rights, which I find a never-endingly interesting subject in terms of the people I

meet and the intellectual problems that being in this movement can sometimes throw in your way...One of the questions I find myself wrestling with is what right have I to do this work? I mean, here am I, very privileged. I have come from a democratic system, supposedly. I've had a lot of advantages. I've never had to do a single brave act in all my life, yet I am telling these people in other parts of the world how they ought to behave. If there's one area in my work that sometimes gives me uncomfortable moments, it's that one. I think the only way around that for me is—instead of being just this American-based human-rights group telling the world how to run itself—to firstly work hard on the problems (of which there is no shortage) in one's own country; and, secondly, to work closely with the local human-rights groups springing up even though they are operating in very, very difficult situations. *Their* members are having to face imprisonment, not me. But I feel that in working closely with them, giving them whatever support, advice, help that *they* ask for, then the danger of becoming patronizing goes away.

Siobhan Dowd, born February 4th, 1960, died in Oxford on August 21st, 2007, of breast cancer. She is survived by her husband, Geoff Morgan.

Siobhan dedicated her last years of writing to important and engaging novels for teenagers. Her first, A Swift, Pure Cry has been as warmly received by readers as by critics, as I'm sure her yet-to-be-released novels will be. We encourage you to visit her [site](#), to get a better picture of the woman who said, "I believe reading is one of life's most exciting adventures." Siobhan's been generous with us all; we will miss her presence, but are confident that her loving influence in the world will continue.