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Scene Last Night: Ondaatje, Siddhartha Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri

By Amanda Gordon - Apr 27, 2011 12:02 PM ET

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Writers Michael Ondaatje and Jhumpa Lahiri. PEN presented Ondaatje with an award, which included a first edition of William Faulkner's first book, "Soldier's Pay," published in 1926. Ondaatje slipped the book into his jacket pocket. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



David Remnick, editor of The New Yorker, and his wife, Esther Fein. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg

Writer Barbara Goldsmith sent a chill through the Hall of Ocean Life last night.

Speaking to 550 guests gathered at the [American Museum of Natural History](#) for the [PEN American Center](#) gala, Goldsmith read a letter reporting on human-rights lawyer and writer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who is in prison in [Iran](#) and was given PEN's Freedom to Write Award.

"On March 17, 2011, officials stormed her cell and took away all the writing," Goldsmith read from the letter, written by the prisoner's husband, Reza Khandan. "She does not even have a pencil to mark the days as they slowly pass on the prison wall."

If she serves her full sentence, Khandan figures, his wife "will be without a pen for 4,000 days," read Goldsmith, a biographer and philanthropist who endowed the Freedom to Write award.

Of the 37 writers who received the award while they were in prison, 32 have gotten out, Goldsmith said: "Our commitment is to do what we can."



Siddhartha Mukherjee, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer," and his wife, artist Sarah Sze, who has an installation on the new section of the High Line opening later this spring. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



Mark Newhouse, chairman, Newspaper Association of America Foundation, Lorry Newhouse, and Barbara Goldsmith, author, most recently, of "Obsessive Genius: The Inner World of Marie Curie." Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



Catriona Crowe, senior archivist, National Archives of Ireland, and Nan Graham, editor in chief, Scribner. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg

Shirin Ebadi, recipient of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize, accepted the award for Sotoudeh and noted that her circumstances are exceptionally cruel.

"Throughout history, writers have been allowed to write," Ebadi said.

The event raised \$850,000 for PEN's general operations and \$150,000 for the [PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature](#), which runs through May 1. Guests, seated on hot-pink cushions and served chicken, included writers Philip Gourevitch, Larissa MacFarquhar, Siddhartha Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Gay Talese.

'The Cat's Table'

Michael Ondaatje, Sri Lanka-born author of "The [English Patient](#)," received the PEN Literary Service Award. Ondaatje dedicated his award to Tamil lawyer Neelan Tiruchelvam, who was killed by a suicide bomber in 1999.

The editor of the [New Yorker](#), David Remnick, noted that an excerpt from Ondaatje's new novel, "The Cat's Table," will be appearing in "a certain magazine" in the next few weeks.

"The stories we heard tonight were moving -- depressing and uplifting," said the president of PEN American Center, philosopher and Princeton University professor Kwame Anthony Appiah, as guests began to mingle for dessert, which included smile-inducing treats like miniature strawberry ice cream cones.

Sir John Soane

It was natural at the gala for the [Sir John Soane Museum Foundation](#) for guests to recall their visits to the museum, which Soane established in his London home in 1833.

Classical architect Allan Greenberg, the event's honoree, said he first knocked on the museum's door when he was 19. A guard told him the museum was closed. The museum director let the



Inigo Ramirez de Haro, director of cultural affairs for the consulate general of Spain in New York, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, president, PEN American Center. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



Chippy Irvine, former president of the Sir John Soane Museum's Foundation; architect Allan Greenberg, who was honored at the foundation's 2011 gala; and Judith Seligson, a painter. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



Robert A.M. Stern, architect, and Philae Dominick. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg

curious student in anyway and showed him around the house, which Soane renovated to accommodate his antiquities, architectural drawings and models.

“I was in awe of the light in the house, the way he crammed skylights in the most unlikely places,” Greenberg said.

As for Soane’s prolific collecting habits, “he had so much stuff, I’ve done the opposite.”

The event at 583 Park featured a photography exhibition of Greenberg’s work: the Treaty Room at the U.S. State Department, a humanities building at [Rice University](#), a personal library in Cambridge, [Massachusetts](#).

Drawings of the Sir John Soane Museum appeared on light fixtures at the dinner tables. Sir John Soane’s own face was brushed in gold on the chocolate desserts.

(Amanda Gordon is a writer and photographer for Muse, the arts and leisure section of Bloomberg News. Any opinions expressed are her own.)

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Simon Roberts, who works in private equity; Sarah Greenberg Roberts, head of publicity for the Weinstein Company, and David Monn, event designer. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



An ice replica of the Sir John Soane Museum, at a gala for the museum's American supporters. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg



Table decorations at the gala for Sir John Soane Museum. Photographer: Amanda Gordon/Bloomberg

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