

Inside the Royal Society of Literature's civil war

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Illustration by Andrei Cojocaru

Writers and readers interested in the pursuits of the Royal Society of Literature (RSL) must be “puzzled by what they hear about its current troubles”, read [a letter](#) published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 16 February. The letter, which was signed by 15 of the society’s fellows including Ian McEwan and Fleur Adcock, described the society’s “failures of governance” and accused the society’s directorate of trying “to suppress criticism by members of the council and other fellows”. The RSL denies this, and claims “there has been an unwarranted campaign of harassment” against senior representatives of the society. A fortnight on, the many disputes tearing apart one of the world’s foremost literary societies remain just as puzzling.

“There’s no question about the fact that a lot of people who have been fellows for a long time have got many different anxieties about the direction the society is taking,” Jeremy Treglown, a biographer and critic, and the RSL fellow who coordinated the letter, told the *New Statesman*.

On 21 February the RSL published a [statement](#) “from the trustees” – the RSL’s council, which is led by the poet Daljit Nagra – that aims to “consider the concerns that have been raised against the RSL and its senior management team”. Many fellows “will have been very

much perturbed, as I was, by the statement”, Treglown said. One of the trustees originally named on the statement has since resigned, the *New Statesman* can reveal. “They weren’t prepared to attach their name to it. So there’s a certain amount of bad faith in that letter,” Treglown said.

Other fellows fear that some members of the council have been “intimidated” into following the line of the directorate (the body made up of paid members of staff who are not necessarily writers). “I think the tension between the management and the council has emerged as the major problem,” said Marina Warner, the historian who was president of the RSL between 2017 and 2021. “How much communication is there? How much is the actual council involved in this decision-making?” In an email to the *New Statesman*, the RSL said it “could not identify any areas where RSL senior management acted outside their remit or without proper reporting and consultation with the chair of council”.

The RSL was founded in 1820, with the patronage of George IV, to “reward literary merit and excite literary talent”. In recent years, the institution has been undergoing a “revolution”, Treglown said. Nagra has been its chair since 2021. When the Booker Prize-winning novelist Bernardine Evaristo was appointed its president (a figurehead role) in 2022, she became the second woman (after Warner) and first person of colour to hold the position. Both Nagra and Evaristo have declared their intention to open up the society to better represent the diversity of the UK’s best writers, particularly with regard to age, class and race. In July 2023 the society announced an “unprecedented change to the election process” whereby readers and writers throughout the UK are invited to recommend writers to become fellows. These recommendations are reviewed by a “specially selected panel” of fellows who nominate a cohort of 30 for election to fellowship. In 2023 [62 new fellows](#) joined the RSL, taking its total fellowship to around 700.

An [outdated Wikipedia entry](#) shows why this might be ruffling feathers: previously the society could “maintain” its level of approximately 600 fellows by usually electing only 14 new ones each year. But this diversity bid dates back further than Nagra and Evaristo’s time at the head of the society: [“RSL Open”](#) – a two-year scheme that trialled the opening of nominations to members of the public – launched in 2020, while in 2018 a [“40 Under 40” initiative](#) aimed to bring a new generation of writers into a society that previously had no members under 30, just three under 40, and an average member age of 70.

“The Royal Society of Literature has done important work in broadening its community and continuing to celebrate and foster literature, and Bernardine Evaristo’s formidable and magnanimous energy has been a force behind that,” the novelist Diana Evans, a fellow of the RSL since 2020, told the *New Statesman*. “Suggestions that the society has become secretive or lacking in transparency seem disproportionate – one might say that it has become more transparent and open. Change is sometimes feared by tradition, yet they can work in tandem, with mutual respect.”

Meena Kandasamy, the Indian-born poet, novelist and translator, became a fellow in 2022. “How does anyone have the gall to say that someone like me doesn’t deserve to be there?” she said. “You are basically disparaging us, you are saying we don’t have the quality, that we don’t deserve to be there, and that Bernardine is some head of a pirate ship because she happened to bring us into this very sacred space. Me, Evaristo, all of us would exist even if the RSL didn’t exist. [Being elected a fellow] is a great honour, no one’s denying that, but our work was not aimed at achieving this honour. Our work was aimed at transforming the world, at making it a better place, at fighting injustice, at making sure that people like us are written about, our lives are valued, and that we become part of Literature with a capital ‘L’.”

Others feel disgruntled. “I think there’s probably a quite reasonable anti-pale, white, male prejudice, an anti-Oxbridge emphasis, and all that seems to me fine,” said Treglown. “But with an organisation that is senior, and that has writers of such significance, to be leaving them behind, which is I think what’s happening at the moment... It’s unwise to cast away people who have the interests of the society at heart, who are not trying to say we shouldn’t widen out.” While Treglown said he is “in favour of diversity”, he is also wary of the society opening out so much that its literary merit is diluted. “I don’t see how the RSL can go on being itself without committing itself to that – I’m afraid – elitist version of things.”

What’s more, there has been confusion about just how “unprecedented” this new election process really is. Speaking on BBC [Radio 4’s *Today programme*](#) on 20 February, Nagra described it as “a more rigorous fellowship than ever before... At one point you didn’t even have to have published a book to be a fellow. Now you have to have published two books... it’s actually harder now than ever before to become a fellow.” This has been widely disputed by fellows who point out that for several decades it has been a requirement to be the author of at least two works of “outstanding literary merit”, as prescribed by the constitution. The trustees’ statement of 21 February, which bears Nagra’s name, acknowledges that the “requirements for Fellowship remain the same” as in previous years.

Such confusion now seems to surround much of the RSL’s communication. Fellows that the *New Statesman* spoke to are bemused by the level to which correspondence is flying back and forth between concerned fellows and the society’s directorate without either side receiving satisfactory responses. In an email to the *New Statesman*, the RSL said: “The RSL chair and management team continue to receive correspondence questioning the trustees’ work and the careful consideration they have given to these matters, as well as the conclusions they reached. We are disappointed by this lack of respect but have nothing further to add – neither would it be appropriate for us to do so.”

Small groups of fellows have been denied the opportunity to privately meet with the RSL’s director, Molly Rosenberg. (The RSL said that it decided that private meetings ahead of a trustees’ meeting of 20 February “would not be appropriate”.) Fellows are *both entertained*

and dismayed that the society is dealing with this fall-out via an outside agency, Bread & Butter PR – though a representative for the agency said it has been working with the RSL since 2020.

Also contained within the attack on the RSL's directorate are allegations that touch on the literary world's most problematic issue: censorship. Maggie Fergusson first started working at the RSL in 1991 as secretary, a position that was later renamed director. In 2018 she left the permanent staff and became the freelance editor of the society's *Review*, its annual magazine. But the most recent issue, expected by members in December, did not arrive. Due to be published in the magazine was an article mentioning a visit to the Palestine Festival of Literature. The article referred to "the devastating machinery of the Israeli state in operation", a phrase that Rosenberg was "unhappy" with, according to Fergusson in an email to the *New Statesman*. Fergusson was involved in conversations about "rejigging" the page in order to "lose" the comment, she recalled. Then, in a phone conversation on 6 December, Rosenberg told Fergusson that the 2023 *Review* had been pulled and that she would like to start working with guest editors. "Obviously, I asked whether that meant the end of the road for me," Fergusson said. "Answer: yes. I felt Molly Rosenberg had delivered the news rather gracelessly."

In a statement to the *New Statesman* the RSL said: "The director rejects the editor's account of their meeting – she did not instruct the editor or anyone else to alter the copy or pages as they were laid out. Any suggestion that the director 'censored' any element of the magazine is false."

Anthony Gardner, the author, RSL fellow and founding editor of its magazine, told the *New Statesman*: "Anyone who worked with Fergusson during her three decades of loyal service to the RSL knows her to be the soul of honesty; she had, moreover, no conceivable grounds for fabricating the claim. By accusing her of lying, [the RSL] has shown itself to be thoroughly unprincipled and aroused the indignation of the great majority of fellows."

"There were reasonable grounds for delaying the publication of the annual *Review*," the RSL trustees' statement reads. When the *New Statesman* asked the RSL what those grounds were, a representative said: "The RSL's Trustees reviewed a number of issues with the proofs of the magazine which were submitted in December, which included the cover design, the use of images and editorial choices in some of the material selected. Their discussions were confidential but they were satisfied with the decision to postpone the magazine in order to improve it." The RSL insists that as a "charity run by writers for writers, it does not condone or practise censorship".

The upcoming *Review*, to be published by the end of March, will contain "all the previously commissioned content... without exception", according to the society's statement. A representative added that "alongside a range of new articles" the *Review* will have "a new look and feel that better reflects the RSL's mission to champion literature for all".

“I’m not involved in the forthcoming issue, and am relieved not to be,” Fergusson said. “I don’t know who is leading the project.” The RSL would not disclose who the issue’s “guest editor” will be, nor how they were selected.

The accusation of censorship follows ongoing outrage from many fellows about what they perceive to be the RSL’s lack of support for Salman Rushdie after the attempt on his life in August 2022. At the time, Marina Warner and the biographer Hermione Lee, another fellow, asked the society whether it would offer support for a public event for Rushdie. In response, they were told “that the society was not political, and therefore had to remain impartial in order to represent the varied writers whom it represents”, Warner said. Instead, Warner and Lee held “Oxford Reads for Rushdie” at the university’s Bodleian Library.

Fergusson recalled “an atmosphere of intimidation and fear” at the last annual general meeting in November 2023, when a fellow attempted to say that the RSL had not given sufficient support to Rushdie. “I gather she was simply not allowed to speak freely.” The RSL has since said that it “categorically condemned this horrific attack” on Rushdie. The two tweets from the RSL’s Twitter account in August 2022 offer “thoughts” and “strength” to Rushdie and his family.

In an email to the *New Statesman*, the RSL said: “The ‘atmosphere of intimidation’ comes not from the director but from a small cohort of fellows who continue to make false and defamatory claims against her.” It is instituting new processes for addressing “inappropriate language and bullying” and “the conduct of fellows in meetings”.

The Twitter statements regarding Rushdie were “much too weak”, Warner said, “because a principle was at stake. The principle of freedom of expression is central to all writers, whatever their views, and therefore should be defended”.

How might the puzzle of the Royal Society of Literature ever be solved? The society told the *New Statesman* that in the past 12 months five fellows have resigned “for a number of different reasons”. (These include Miranda Seymour, who has spoken publicly about her resignation, and the trustee who resigned last week.) It seems a high number, given that being a fellow is an honour (many proudly use the suffix “FRSL” after their names) that requires little to no work in return. The trustees have resolved to undertake an independent review of governance in 2024. The society has also referred itself to the Charity Commission. “We can confirm that in line with our guidance, the Royal Society of Literature has filed a serious incident report relating to recent press coverage. We are currently engaging with the trustees,” said a Commission spokesperson.

There is a fundamental flaw to the recent communications from the Royal Society of Literature, said Jeremy Treglown: it “does not grasp the critical intelligence of the people it’s addressing. The fellows of the RSL are not just writers. They’re readers. To be talked down to betrays a misunderstanding of who you’re dealing with”.