

KEYNOTE: Wister recipients sound the alarm



Bestselling authors W. Michael and Kathleen O'Neal Gear have been writing for 35 years.



The Gears' keynote address receives a standing ovation.



By Micki Fuhrman

Until 2021, WWA had never chosen *two* recipients for its Owen Wister Award for Lifetime Achievement, and no two honorees have ever been so well acquainted. Kathleen O'Neal Gear and W. Michael Gear were married in 1982, and the pair has since worked side by side as anthropologists, archaeologists and writers, not to mention as bison farmers and off-the-gridders.

In their keynote address, the best-selling authors of more than 70 books thanked WWA for “surprising us” with the award and proceeded to address head-on the challenges facing writers of historical fiction in the midst of today’s volatile discourse about the way politics, ethnicity and gender are represented. Kathleen Gear said that, rather than the “Covid Year,” she and Michael called 2020 the “Story Killer Year.”

“Stories have been the heart of cultures for as far back as archaeologists can trace humanity’s ancestors,” she said. “Probably for just as long, stories have been under assault.”

Last year, the Gears endured pressure from their New York-based publishing house, which employs “sensitivity readers,” to rewrite portions of their historical fiction books that were deemed controversial or politically incorrect.

“We’ve had our own books torn apart by censors until they bear only a slight resemblance to the story we wrote,” she stated. “It does not seem to us that this is about justice or righting the wrongs of the past, but about a politically correct present. What we see is the freedom of speech being handed over to groups as small as the employees of a publishing house.”

Michael Gear elaborated on the reality of having their efforts to present history and cultural depictions, which they had researched and considered to be sound, overhauled by censors with no particular credentials.

“It was chilling enough for me that I couldn’t write another sentence on the sequel to [the book] because, for the first time in my life, I had a censor staring over my shoulder watching every word I typed. And it was the most frightening, horrible thing I’ve endured in 30 years in this business.” The Gears were seeking to engage a literary attorney with litigation experience when the publisher backed down and they reached a compromise on the book’s content, including “descriptions and speech of ethnic characters.”

The publishing model has changed dramatically since the Gears began writing 35 years ago, he said, especially in terms of distribution. Michael said he thinks the publishing industry has become “incredibly corporate,” and that authors should expect “more contraction and more tunnel vision,” with fewer editors and fewer acquisitions.

But there is good news, according to WWA’s newest Wister honorees. Michael offered hope by saying, “Honestly, folks, I think that the future lies with some of our smaller, regional publishers who are thinking outside the box. The distribution that traditional publishing has relied on is not coming back. New York [publishers] will remain a factor even though their emphasis is different. I can’t see a future for Western novels in New York. I think we need to be looking at these young, bright [independent] companies because they are going to reinvent publishing.”

Posing beside his spouse and co-author, Kathleen, Michael grinned mischievously though a shock of white whiskers and said, “So there you have it. The truth, as revealed by Michael and Kathleen.”

