

# Tales of humanity, sometimes joyous, sometimes harrowing

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CONTRIBUTING WRITER

In her splendid historical work "A World Made New," Mary Ann Glendon expatiates on the painstaking efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt and a multinational cadre of intellectuals, politicians and philosophers to weave a visionary charter that comprehensively details human rights relevant to all people. An extraordinary achievement, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights became a reality in the wake of the horror of the World War II.

"Today, the Declaration is the single most important reference point for cross-national discussions of how to order our future together on our increasingly conflict-ridden and interdependent planet. But time and forgetfulness are taking their toll. Even within the international human rights movement, the Declaration has come to be treated more like a monument to be venerated from a distance than a living document to be reappropriated by each generation. Rarely, in fact, has a text been praised yet so little read or understood."

To celebrate the promise embodied in the Declaration, the United Kingdom's Amnesty International has brought together 37 superb short stories by writers from around the world in a volume entitled "Freedom: Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." Joyce Carol Oates and Walter Mosley are well-known while others like Hector Aguilar Camin and Banana Yoshimoto will be new to many.

An air of menace, terror and helplessness permeates a number of these tales. Individuals are subjected to the brute will of an arrogant political order. Incarceration, isolation and beatings are applied in often murky or absurd circumstances. A character bears these violations and must discover an inner strength in order to endure.

In Helen Dunmore's "Where I Keep My Faith," an imprisoned woman opines: "I am not the material of which martyrs are made. I have always known this. The others say they are the same. It's just that we took a step, and then another step, and these steps brought us here. But in fact it's not possible to count the steps. And you can't take them back again, because in order to do that you would have to unmake everything. I would have to become a woman with ten toenails and ripe, moist skin and hair the color of earth after heavy rain has fallen on it."

Article 4 of the Universal Declaration states clearly: "No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms." Yet in our time slavery is thriving. The heart-wrenching conte by Mohammed Naseehu Ali, "The Long Ride Back Home," is a profound evocation of this reality. Sando



REUTERS/MOLLY RILEY

A woman chants during a rally held by Amnesty International in front of the Egyptian Embassy

is a boy who hopes to go to school. His father tells him he will be enrolled but first he must work in order to raise tuition. In actuality Sando has been sold into slavery. He becomes a powerless cipher. "Sando worked all day and every day, and was unofficially allowed only two free days in a year: the day of the Feast of Ramadan and the day of the Feast of Sacrifice, the two major Muslim holidays. And only on those days was he left in relative peace." Eventually three local boys subject Sando to a violent humiliation.

An offering by Marina Lewycka titled "Business Philosophy" portrays a slimy peddler in human flesh. "Look at it from my point of view - it's not easy trying to make an honest living in these parts, but my business philosophy is to give my customers what they want. And what they want is girls. Nice, willing, pretty girls." Sometimes a young female is not so pliant. A male employee administers discipline: "Like I said, no one sets out to hurt the girlies deliberately, but Branko's a big lad and I sometimes think he doesn't know his own strength, so she ended up with a couple of fractured ribs and a few broken bones in her feet, nothing that wouldn't mend with a bit of rest." The pimp expresses fury over one young woman's escape to the safety of a women's refuge.

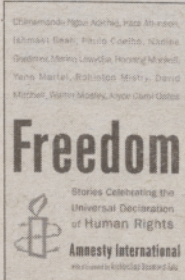
David Mitchell's piece "Character Development" takes place in Iraq. Some British soldiers are conducting a rough interrogation of an Iraqi doctor. A pistol that supposedly contains blanks actually has a

live round. The doctor is shot and killed. A young British soldier who witnesses the gory event is instructed to understand that the doctor "left the base alive and well and cheerful at 16:00 hours after helping us establish the facts." Told implicitly to shut up about the incident, he is then sent home immediately on leave. The incident haunts the soldier. Before his murder the doctor had invoked and started to recite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Back home and drinking with his brother, the soldier reveals something to his sibling: "Looked up the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Learned it all by heart, I did. Want to hear it?"

"The War on Women" by Kate Atkinson limns the swift imposition of misogynistic policies designed to transform women into chattel. The tale oozes an Orwellian creepiness. Liana Badr's "March of the Dinosaurs" portrays the tension accompanying the sudden incursion of Israeli soldiers into a besieged Palestinian neighborhood: "Their helmets erased any trace of the humanity a person might hope to see from their rock-like faces."

These and other short literary gems in this fine collection are an opportunity to become acquainted with an array of writers whom the reader may be encountering for the first time. It is a rewarding and worthwhile endeavor.

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