



PEN

THE
THINGS
WE
COULD
NOT
CARRY

PEN CANADA
2023/24 ANNUAL REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Leila Marshy

EDITOR

OUR NATIVE SOIL DRAWS
ALL OF US, BY I KNOW NOT
WHAT SWEETNESS, AND
NEVER ALLOWS US TO FORGET.
ONLY THE MIND CANNOT
BE SENT INTO EXILE.

– OVID

It's not clear anymore why Emperor Augustus banished the Roman poet Ovid, author of the fifteen-volume *Metamorphoses*, to a remote town on the Black Sea in 8 CE at the height of his fame. But we do know that he felt that exile was “worse than murder.”

Because PEN Canada's mandate is to defend freedom of expression and “help free persecuted writers from prison,” it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that exile — in spite of it being often an escape from death — brings its own sorrows and hardships.

To be cut off from home and belongings, family and community — all the things that reflect back to us who we are — this is the plight and pain of the writer in exile. “Here I am the barbarian,” Ovid wrote, “understood by nobody.”

Canadians are good at helping people immigrate. We understand the struggle to get here, the awe of arrival, the making of a new life. But we are less aware of the cost of leaving. Whether planned over weeks and months, or suddenly in the middle of the night, leaving can be excruciating.

We have tried to capture a bit of this nuance and hardship in the theme of this year's PEN Canada Annual Report: *The Things We Could Not Carry*. What are the fading memories, the discarded objects, the intangible monuments and milestones that we were forced to abandon? And what has this sense of *abandoning* done to us?

After ten years in exile, Ovid died in Tomis (present-day Constanța, Romania), never seeing his friends or family again. In 2017, Rome city council unanimously adopted a motion to “repair the serious wrong,” and overturned Ovid's banishment. It was time to come home.

ARTICLE 19
UNIVERSAL
DECLARATION
OF HUMAN
RIGHTS

EVERYONE HAS THE RIGHT
TO FREEDOM OF OPINION
AND EXPRESSION; THIS
RIGHT INCLUDES FREEDOM
TO HOLD OPINIONS
WITHOUT INTERFERENCE
AND TO SEEK, RECEIVE
AND IMPART INFORMATION
AND IDEAS THROUGH ANY
MEDIA AND REGARDLESS
OF FRONTIERS.



PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Grace Westcott

The last year has been a challenging one for the world, and PEN Canada in it.

We have watched with growing concern the rise in book banning in the United States, documented rigorously by PEN America, amid fears and indeed, disturbing signs, that the ideologies behind organized book-banning efforts in libraries and schools may yet be imported into Canada. As Mary Jo Godwin, former editor of the *Wilson Library Bulletin* once wrote: “A truly great library has something in it to offend everyone.” Precisely so. We must all confront our assumptions and read something with which we disagree. Our challenge as PEN is to help shore up our defences in this country against concerted book-banning attacks on our intellectual freedom.

In 2023, the Canadian government launched a public inquiry into foreign interference in federal elections, chaired by the Honourable Marie-Josée Hogue. The Hogue Inquiry has tangentially shed light on the Digital Transnational Repression (DTR) suffered by dissidents among diaspora communities at the hands of the authoritarian governments they tried to leave behind. We know this well, as several members of our Writers in Exile community continue to endure online threats intended to intimidate and silence them. Their challenge is to find the courage to persist. Our challenge is to expand the public review of digital repression beyond interference in federal elections to include foreign repression of ordinary people on Canadian soil.

Online harms of all kinds continue to plague us. The federal government has finally tabled the Online Harms Act, Bill C-63, which addresses seven of the most pressing online harms. Notably, however, the bill does not address disinformation. While the bill is most welcome, regular readers of our newsletter may recall a preliminary critique of Bill C-63 I wrote that spelled out several broad concerns. We will be elaborating on our concerns and collaborating with like-minded organizations to make a submission to the standing committee after the bill reaches second reading. The challenge here is to ensure that the proposed Act, within its defined focus, sufficiently respects freedom of expression, while addressing the online harms that can chill expression.

On the international front, the second anniversary of the war in Ukraine passed in February with no end in sight. PEN Ukraine has documented and mourned the loss of many writers, including the award-winning young author, Victoria Amelina, who was tragically killed by a Russian missile strike on a pizza restaurant in Kramatorsk last June. We paid tribute to Victoria at our Awards & Readings in Solidarity with Persecuted Writers event at the Toronto International Festival of Authors in September. PEN Canada joined with PEN Ukraine in calling out the attacks on writers and journalists, including citizen journalists, and the destruction of books, libraries, and cultural institutions.

And finally, the PEN community, and indeed the world, has been profoundly shocked by the massacre and hostage-taking of Israelis by Hamas on October 7, and the death and devastation suffered by Palestinians in the months since as the Israeli army conducts its overwhelming offensive in Gaza. The world has erupted in anger over the Gaza war while here at home, amidst demonstrations and conflict, we have been deeply alarmed by rising antisemitism, Islamophobia, and hate. We have seen disturbing signs of recrimination in civil society against those who peacefully express their strong views on the war, creating fear and pressure to self-censor.

Countless organizations have struggled to find the proper response, beset with internal divisions and conflicting opinions about the war and the role that their organization ought to play in addressing it. PEN Canada has not been immune to this.

Our board of directors reflected long and hard about our proper role as a non-partisan writers' organization dedicated to the defence of freedom of expression, and came to this consensus: **Our role is to defend writers imperiled by their writing, to protect and champion individual writers' right to express their views, and to encourage constructive debate among dissenting voices.**

PEN's mission is not to take positions on matters of geopolitics or to choose a side in a contentious political debate. Our mission is to promote conditions in which constructive debate and dissent are supported, not to dictate the answer.

PRESIDENT'S REPORT

But we are compelled to speak out forcefully where our mission is engaged. In the wrenching matter of the war in Gaza, we sought to carry out the following:

- Condemn the killing and injuring of writers and journalists in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel, whether individually targeted or as casualties of war, contrary to, among other things, the international obligation to protect those reporting from a war zone. In our communications we have chosen to rely on the reporting of the Committee to Protect Journalists (as has The New York Times), because they appear to fact check, they report the facts without editorializing, and they regularly update the numbers of the dead, injured and arrested. More intimately, our board member, Marcello Di Cintio, wrote about the poet Saleem al-Naffar, whom he had interviewed years before the war. Al-Naffar and his family were killed by an Israeli airstrike. By early June, the Committee to Protect Journalists had reported that 108 journalists and media workers were confirmed killed: 103 Palestinian, 3 Lebanese, and 2 Israeli. This is a shockingly high number.
- Assert the right of Canadian writers to express their views on the war within the limits of the law without unfair recrimination. Where we have sufficient confirmed facts, we have spoken out strongly against attempts in civil society to silence or punish. It is civil society, not the government, that is the focus here. We are calling on our fellow citizens to abide by our longstanding commitment for civil discourse in a liberal democracy. We also call out antisemitism, Islamophobia, and hate speech for what they are: efforts to silence.

Our board members engaged in frank, sometimes heated, but always civil and respectful debate. Were we perfect? No. Did we achieve a unanimous view? No. Our membership is diverse in its perspectives, and so is our board. But to a person, all showed courtesy, humanity, restraint, an ability to look past unintended offence or misstatement, and a willingness — so critically important — to listen to what was felt beneath the words that were said. Such civility is the necessary precondition to greater understanding. I thank them all, and am honoured to call them colleagues.

Finally, let me say a few words of thanks to our staff.

Theresa Johnson continues to make herself the indispensable engine of our operations, keeping the office in excellent working order. All of those who work with her appreciate her skill and dedication to the tasks at hand, her ability to rise to a challenge, and her far-sighted planning for what comes next.

We added Eilish Waller to our staff in 2023 as Communications Coordinator, and after training with our Chair of Communications, Karen Walton, Eilish has taken off, eagerly learning her way into the workings of PEN, responsible for social media and leading the challenging project of building a new PEN Canada website (a work in progress).

We have enjoyed a second year now working with the ever-resourceful and creative Josh Knelman on our signature events at the Toronto International Festival of Authors: the Graeme Gibson Talk, in partnership with CBC Radio Ideas, and our Awards & Readings event.

While she is a volunteer, not staff, I want to recognize PEN Canada member, Kim Echlin, for her committed efforts on behalf of PEN. Kim serves on the PEN International Writers for Peace Committee, and has generously undertaken to lead PEN Canada in a new collaboration between several PEN Centres: the building of a network of writers under the age of 35 from across the world, tentatively called “The Tomorrow Club.”

And finally, our Executive Director, Brendan de Caires, continues to shine in his role representing PEN Canada on panels and at podiums, focusing this year on one of our key priorities: book-banning. His ability to create a winning shortlist from the submissions to the RBC New Voices Award and to provide ongoing support and opportunities for that shortlist has meant mounting career successes, as our winners find publishers and recognition in a notoriously challenging literary marketplace. His deep personal dedication to helping writers in peril remains a rock-solid foundation for our work.

I thank all of them, and all of you, our members and supporters, for holding fast in these difficult times.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Brendan de Caires

I came to Canada 20 years ago, leaving behind more than I realized. By then, I'd lived in six countries after moving, aged 10, from a comfortable, middle-class West Indian home to a Jesuit boarding school in the north of England for eight years of purgatory (a boys-only Hogwarts, minus wizards and magic, with unrelenting bad weather, bad food, and a great deal of racism and bullying). Three years of university eased some of the trauma, but subsequent displacements deepened my sense of disconnection, marooning me in unfamiliar landscapes, forever among people who looked, thought, and sounded very different. Hard lessons about cultural conformity ensued, and I learned to live with a certain measure of diffidence.

Canada was to be a final destination but it only raised further doubts — and despite my many privileges, adjusting to life here was a shock. *Wind chill factor* — a dreadful new phrase — is mostly what I remember of my first cold dark months. I'd naively thought that upstate New York was the coldest place I'd ever live in, but now I found myself routinely waiting for a bus at -15 degrees on winter mornings. Then I spent an average of four hours a day commuting to my first job — which took 18 months to find. And yet, I was lucky, for even without “Canadian experience”, I was a native English-speaker and had a young family to anchor me through the long process of assimilation.

So, I am wary of a common attitude towards the global South: the idea that simple relocation to the True North is the *summum bonum* for all who face political or economic pressure elsewhere. Let me assure you, it is not. But the tranquility of a stable democracy, where ethnic tensions have not overwhelmed the society, where you can mock a prime minister without a late-night knock on the door, where riots, arson, and terror are not part of every election, and where a driver's license or passport can be renewed, sans bribe, within a day — these little miracles are why so many choose Canada. Would that more Canadians knew this.

From the safety of Toronto, however, the wider world looks scarier every year. PEN's 2023 Freedom to Write Index recorded a five-year high in the number of jailed writers: a staggering 339, up from 238 in 2019. Unsurprisingly, China and Iran account for nearly half of this total (107 and 49 respectively), with many targeted for such Orwellian crimes as "picking quarrels and provoking trouble." The Index also notes that: "War and conflict had a significant impact on writers in 2023, as the crackdown on dissent in both Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and in Russia resulted in substantial increases in the number of jailed writers, placing both countries in the top 10 for the first time."

The October attacks changed other places too. In several mature democracies, self-appointed guardians of the public sphere have monitored their fellow citizens with terrifying captiousness and bad faith. In the UK, for example, an episode of the University Challenge quiz, which aired on November 20th, led a Conservative peer to accuse a headscarf-wearing participant of engaging in a "coded attack on Jews" by provocatively wearing a jacket with the colours of the Palestinian flag and displaying an octopus as her team mascot. (Nazis used the octopus as a symbol of the so-called tentacles of Jewish influence.) These alleged transgressions by Melika Gorgianeh, a doctoral student in astrophysics at the University of Oxford, led The Right Honourable Baroness Foster of Oxtou to call for her expulsion from the university and for her arrest.

Gorgianeh faced a deluge of abuse, including death threats, before these claims were fact-checked. Eventually, the BBC revealed that the episode had been filmed in March 2023, six months before the attacks; that the offending cuddly toy was "one of many chosen by the team during the course of the series"; and that "the jacket worn by one of the contestants was navy blue, orange, pink and green" with "no connection to any flag." Baroness Foster reached a legal settlement and issued a grudging half-apology. Not justice, certainly, nor even its distant relative, especially since Britain is a jurisdiction that favours complainants. But is there a better illustration of this ugly political moment in which Palestinians can be defamed, dehumanized, threatened, and collectively punished with almost complete impunity?

I wish I could say that Canada's leading institutions, politicians, and civic leaders reacted more thoughtfully, or decently. They did not. When I attended a vigil to mark the deaths of 100 journalists and media workers killed in Gaza since the start of the conflict — an event that also paid tribute to an Israeli journalist killed in the October attacks — it was conspicuously situated outside the walls of a university campus. There were several mentions of journalists absenting themselves to avoid reprisals at their workplace. Having grown up in a fearful, undemocratic country, the quiet courage of this ceremony and the chill it was resisting felt horribly familiar.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

In September, at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, the Ukraine war was the focus of our annual Graeme Gibson Talk, a wide-ranging conversation between Masha Gessen and Andrey Kurkov. They also joined a reading for imprisoned writers during which I had the privilege of presenting our One Humanity Award to Sanaa Seif, Alaa Abd El-Fattah's remarkable sister. Ashley Audrain, Louise Dennys, John Irving, Vincent Lam, Kyo Maclear, Carol Off, Anna Porter, and our president Grace Westcott also read tributes or presented awards. A week later, Narges Mohammadi received the Nobel Peace Prize, and The Globe and Mail reprinted the message she had sent us.

At that ceremony, Louise Dennys presented our 2023 New Voices Award to Christine Wu. Their height disparity forced Christine to stand on tip-toe to reach the microphone. As I watched her make her speech this way, flawlessly, it seemed a perfect symbol of the grace and courage that any emerging writer needs to stake a claim in the world of Canadian letters. A few months later, as Christine held an entire room spellbound with her poetry at a reading in Roncesvalles, Toronto, I felt deeply grateful that PEN Canada has a role, however modest, in helping writers like her find their place in the ever-widening community of Canadian Literature.

Forty years into its mission, PEN Canada relies heavily on the sustained engagement and support of its patrons. This year's annual report marks the first in which we acknowledge testamentary pledges from longstanding donors. As part of this, we created the Legacy Society to recognize those who have told us of their planned legacy giving. Bequests can have a transformative impact on charities like ours and they go a long way to ensure that our work will continue in the decades ahead.

Once again, at the end of a busy year, I'd like to record my profound gratitude for the privilege of working with Theresa Johnson, our office manager. Her inexhaustible patience, efficiency, and humour have improved every aspect of our operations. This year, our staff was further strengthened by the arrival of Eilish Waller, our superb new communications coordinator. I am honoured to have them as colleagues. I am also grateful for the unflagging energy, enthusiasm, and meticulous oversight of our president, Grace Westcott.

THIS YEAR'S ANNUAL REPORT MARKS THE FIRST IN WHICH WE ACKNOWLEDGE TESTAMENTARY PLEDGES FROM LONGSTANDING DONORS. AS PART OF THIS, WE CREATED THE LEGACY SOCIETY TO RECOGNIZE THOSE WHO HAVE TOLD US OF THEIR PLANNED LEGACY GIVING. BEQUESTS CAN HAVE A TRANSFORMATIVE IMPACT ON CHARITIES LIKE OURS AND THEY GO A LONG WAY TO ENSURE THAT OUR WORK WILL CONTINUE IN THE DECADES AHEAD.

SAEED TEEBI

PALESTINE

THE DIGNITY OF SOCKS

"I DIDN'T KNOW IT THEN
BUT SOME THINGS
CAN NEVER FIT IN
A SUITCASE."

Saeed Teebi is a writer and lawyer based in Toronto. His debut collection of short stories, *Her First Palestinian*, was published in 2022 and was a finalist for the Atwood Gibson Writers' Trust Award and the Kobo Rakuten Emerging Writer Award, among others.



SAEED TEEBI

THE
DIGNITY
OF
SOCKS



"NO WAY,"
SHE SAID.
"OUR
SUITCASES
ARE
ALREADY
TOO
FULL."

One of the eccentric beliefs I held during my childhood was that wearing socks confers dignity on a person. Growing up in the searing climate of Kuwait, this belief put me in a decided minority, but I was wholly devoted to it. While everyone sashayed through the desert in sandals — their cracked heels aerated and their bumptious toes wiggling — I sheathed my feet in neat, white athletic socks, slipped them into massive sneakers, and secretly reveled in all the dignity I was exhibiting.

Early in the summer of 1990, my family was packing for a vacation to America to visit relatives. It was to be my first trip to the land of all my favourite comics and sitcoms. My parents had planned for only a measly few weeks, but in my eleven-year-old brain, there was a chance the trip may somehow be extended. I could not work out how that could happen, but it seemed like an eventuality that had to be planned for. I asked my mother if I could take more clothes; I felt that we had left many good items in the closet. “No way,” she said. “Our suitcases are already too full.” Over several days, I begged and begged — to no avail. “What about socks?” I said finally. Balled up or spread out, it seemed to me you could always add more socks. My mother, no doubt at the end of her rope, relented.

I sprinted to my closet. When I was done stuffing that suitcase, only a few socks remained in the drawer. I looked at them with regret.

A few months later, in California, our family watched news reports of Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait live on TV. My parents had their hands on their heads, as if trying to prevent them from exploding. As Palestinian refugees, Kuwait had never granted our family citizenship, but we at least had residency there. Now, we watched as the only home we’d known was being ransacked in absentia.

I thought: it was smart that I got more socks.

Our American vacation morphed into a stranding, and then into something more permanent. We became, essentially, refugees again. Even when the Iraqi army eventually withdrew, Kuwait did not permit us to come back. We were suddenly jobless, destitute, had no stable status, and no future.

I thought: I should have taken more socks.

That was many years ago. I’ve gotten many more foot coverings since then, some quite colourful and fancy even. But now, in 2024, we watch on live TV as a different army destroys and ransacks Palestinian homes, this time in Gaza. The children we see in the footage (those that are still alive, anyway) are almost always barefoot, their belongings having been pounded to smithereens, or looted by soldiers to parade on their social media accounts.

But every time I look at these children — and their sometimes hurt, sometimes defiant, but always enduring faces — I think one thing: at least they have their dignity.

LUIS HORACIO NÁJERA

MEXICO



Luis Horacio Nájera is a Mexican journalist exiled in Canada after fleeing his country because of death threats received from a drug cartel. He is co-author of the bestseller *The Wolfpack: The Millennial Mobsters Who Brought Chaos and the Cartels to the Canadian Underworld* (Penguin Random House, 2022), and *The Uncaged Voice: Stories by Writers in Exile* (Cormorant Books, 2023). He lives in Toronto.

A SMALL PIECE OF PLASTIC

"WORKING AS A JOURNALIST
GAVE ME A PURPOSE AND
A RESPONSIBILITY THAT, IN EXILE
I NO LONGER HAVE."

LUIS HORACIO NÁJERA

A
SMALL
PIECE
OF
PLASTIC



"THIS SMALL
PIECE OF
PLASTIC IS
POWERFUL.
IT OPENS
AND CLOSES
DOORS. IT WILL
BRING YOU
SOME FRIENDS
AND MORE
ENEMIES."

A few days before the end of my last term of undergraduate studies in journalism, our experienced and esteemed professor Silvino Jaramillo ended his class earlier than usual. He closed his notebook, took a deep breath, and in his firm, deep voice gave us a life lesson that after 34 years I still treasure.

“Among the many privileges you already have if you are working as journalists, or will have in the future, is holding a credential with your photo and name next to the word Press. This small piece of plastic is powerful. It opens and closes doors. It will bring you some friends and more enemies. Identifying yourselves as journalists with that small piece of plastic is an enormous responsibility.”

Speaking at the time to 12 attentive students, Professor Jaramillo was right. Holding a Press ID card is a responsibility. It gave me purpose by having the privilege of connecting with people, revealing the truth, giving voice to those in need, and holding accountable those in power. After extensively reporting in a national newspaper about the wrongdoings of the police and the state’s attorney general which led to scapegoating a bus driver who was illegally charged as the serial killer of 12 women, the driver was acquitted, in part thanks to the national outrage provoked by my publications detailing the torture and abuse he suffered after his arrest.

In a lighter vein, my Press ID gave me access to places and events that I would never ever dream about, as happened in 1996 when I travelled to Arizona to report on the Super Bowl between the Dallas Cowboys and the Pittsburgh Steelers.

When I was preparing my luggage to flee my country, I remembered a large, yellow envelope where I kept the many Press IDs collected throughout my career between 1989 and 2008. Some of them were from the newspapers I worked for, some from specific events I reported on. These IDs were a testament to the life I loved, but also the life that forced me to flee. I carefully placed the envelope in my bag in case I would need it to prove my identity as a journalist — as indeed it happened.

Fifteen years after we left our country, I sometimes go back to the large, yellow envelope to hold in my hand those small cards. Each one reminds me of an enriching time in my life when my purpose was to do journalism.

ÉSERY MONDÉSIR

HAITI




Ésery Mondésir is a Haitian-born video artist and filmmaker based in Toronto. An assistant professor at OCAD University, Mondésir's work draws from personal and collective memory, official archives, vernacular records, and the everyday to generate a reading of our society from its margins in a "postmigration" context.

MUCH TO SAY, MANMAN, NO MOUTHS

MY MOTHER WAS
MY FIRST COUNTRY,
THE FIRST PLACE
I EVER LIVED.
NAYYIRAH WAHEED

ÉSERY MONDÉSIR

MUCH
TO
SAY,
MANMAN,
NO
MOUTHS



"BUT
HERE
YOU ARE
DYING
DEAD
MOTHER
COUNTRY."

Dear Manman,

I have often kept your name under my tongue
silent as a grain of salt
to not cry out the pain of leaving you there
on that mossy bed,
among the zealots, the spit and the piss
I left you there
my heart elsewhere
I ran towards what was left of my youth
and the youth that abandoned you, far from your violated youth.

It was an April morning, pink like all April mornings. My friend Smith — yes, he bears the name of my father, but I talk not of my father but Smith, Katie's brother, Pastor Simon's daughter who suddenly arrived in our neighbourhood after the son of the father — Baby Doc — was forced out of power on a certain February 7, 1986. The sun had reappeared through the smoky skies, and with it joy, green lila leaves and scorched human flesh.

I always loved Smith, perhaps because he took me for an older brother, and I rejoiced in saying out loud the name of my father gone too soon, eaten by the disease no one knew but that will later bear our initials somehow. Just yesterday, a certain star Republican from New York City would clamour to his xenophobe friends that, "All Haitians have AIDS!"

Smith went to France for a while. Katie told me he lived in Paris, *sans papier*, identity-less. He had returned before I left, deported, repelled by indifference and hatred, blue again like a grain of sand on a "pretty little beach" in Miami where decades earlier we landed lifeless or scared, non-Cubans, poor pawns on the chessboard of the game of the Republican president, not this one, but Reagan, who was also a star.

Believe me, Manman, there is much to say, just not enough mouths!

If I walked briskly
it was to keep a distance between your wounds and mine
to keep your sores foreign to my flesh
... to live

For on an April morning, Smith will take me to your place
and I will have left you there
my heart elsewhere

I wished to return to you
accomplished-son-useful
but here you are
dying-dead-mother-country.

WRITERS IN EXILE COMMITTEE REPORT

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie

The Weight of What We Leave Behind

*Like one who brings an important letter
to the counter after office hours:
the counter is already closed.*

*Like one who seeks to warn the city
of an impending flood but speaks another language.
They do not understand him.*

*Like a beggar who knocks for the fifth time
at the door where he has four times been given something:
the fifth time he is hungry.*

*Like one whose blood flows from a wound
and who awaits the doctor: his blood goes on flowing.
So do we come forward and report that evil has been done us.*

Bertolt Brecht's poignant words evoke a profound resonance for those who have stood at the precipice of transition, bidding farewell to one life while embarking on the uncertain journey to another. His imagery paints a vivid portrait of the intangible burdens, memories, and experiences that shape our identity. Brecht's allegory, likening the struggle of communication to the futile attempts of a beggar seeking sustenance, or the persistent flow of blood from an unhealed wound, encapsulates the essence and terrible weight of the "things we could not carry."

In 2019, my CBC film, *Memories-기억*, was one of several screened at the Toronto International Film Festival's New Horizon program. As the credits rolled and the lights brightened, questions arose from both the stage and the audience that echoed the intricate tapestry of human emotion and connection. I found myself drawn to a repeated sentiment: the longing for family and the bittersweet peace that their absence brings.

My personal journey to a new country was met with the initial excitement of discovery, juxtaposed against the weight of what I had left behind. While the arrival of my family softened the edges of this transition, the process of assimilation into a new culture and way of life has never ceased revealing layers of complexity, nuance, and even heartbreak.

Certain aspects of my former life resisted translation or transplantation. The spectre of my homeland's political unrest and lawlessness loomed large, a painful reminder of the unresolved challenges and unhealed wounds left behind. These wounds have persisted, shaping my perspective and tinting my present experiences with its dull pain.

The things we could not carry are more than mere possessions or forgotten souvenirs; they are the very threads that weave the tapestry of our identity, delicate in their impermanence. They are the memories of loved ones departed, the traditions of a distant homeland, and the echoes of a past we can never fully reclaim.

Navigating the labyrinthine terrain of a new country necessitates a delicate dance between reconciling the past and embracing the present. It requires finding a balance between holding on to life rafts of cherished memories while bravely plunging into the unknown. This journey is marked by moments of clarity amidst the fog of uncertainty, triumphs as well as trials, and the unwavering resilience of the human spirit.

In engaging with fellow exiled writers through PEN Canada's programs, I have found solace in shared narratives and kinship in shared burdens. Through these exchanges, we unearth the common threads of our unspoken struggles, finding strength in our collective resilience.

Ultimately, it is not the weight of what we leave behind that defines us, but rather the courage with which we continue to confront the unknown and forge ahead. In the tapestry of life, it is not the destination that holds significance, but the myriad experiences that shape and mold us along the way.

For the latest activities, events and scholarships from the Writers in Exile, please see page 43 and page 51.

HONOR MEMBE

ERITREA

YUSUF MOHAMED ALI

MATTEWOS HABTEAB

DAWIT HABTEMICHAEL

MEDHANIE HAILE

EMANUEL ASRAT

TEMESKEN GHEBREYESUS

DAWIT ISAAK

FESSHAYE YOHANNES

SAID ABDELKADER

SEYOUM TSEHAYE

EGYPT

ALAA ABD EL-FATTAH

IRAN

NARGES MOHAMMADI

ARY RS

ERITREA

In September 2001, Eritrean President Afeworki forced the country's independent newspapers to close and 13 journalists were arrested. Those who remain alive, 22 years later, are now the longest-detained journalists in the world.

The following Eritrean journalists were named honorary members of PEN Canada: **Yusuf Mohamed Ali** (editor-in-chief of *Tsigenay*), **Matthewos Habteab** (editor-in-chief of *Meqaleh*), **Dawit Habtemichael** (reporter for *Meqaleh*), **Medhanie Haile** (editor-in-chief of *Keste Debena*), **Emanuel Asrat** (editor of *Zemen*), **Temesken Ghebreyesus** (reporter for *Keste Debena*), **Dawit Isaak** (writer and co-owner of *Setit*), **Fesshaye Yohannes** (playwright, poet and publisher of *Setit*), **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas*) and **Seyoum Tsehaye** (TV and radio journalist who wrote a weekly column for *Setit*).

In 2007, reports indicated that Ali, Abdelkader, Haile and Yohannes died in custody due to harsh conditions, a lack of medical attention, and reported torture. Habteab, Habtemichael, Ghebreyesus and Yohannes have not been heard from and are presumed dead.

In 2021, PEN International and the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR) were part of an international coalition of human rights groups that called for Magnitsky Sanctions against the Eritrean officials responsible for the journalists' imprisonment. In a *Globe and Mail* Op-Ed published in September 2023, the RWCHR urged the "community of democracies" to "invoke the Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations, impose targeted Magnitsky Sanctions against senior Eritrean officials involved in Mr. Isaak's case, refer the situation to the prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, and prioritize this case at the forthcoming High-Level Forum on Arbitrary Detention."

HONORARY MEMBERS

EGYPT

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is an Egyptian software developer, blogger and pro-democracy activist who rose to prominence during the Arab Spring and was instrumental in bringing about the downfall of President Hosni Mubarak. He and his wife, **Manal Hassan**, created the online blog aggregators *Manalaa* and *Omraneya*, the first Arab blog aggregators to refuse to exclude writing based on its content. Abd El-Fattah was first arrested in 2006 during a peaceful protest. In 2011, he took part in the Tahrir Square protests and was arrested for inciting violence. Abd El-Fattah was arrested again in 2013 and detained for 115 days without trial. In November 2013, he was arrested and charged for organizing a political protest without a permit. He was released on bail in March 2014, but three months later sentenced, in absentia, to 15 years in jail for violating Egypt's Protest Law. On December 20, 2021, Abd El-Fattah was sentenced to an additional five years in prison on charges of "broadcasting false news" related to a social media post.

In April, 2022, Abd El-Fattah began a hunger strike in protest against prison conditions and to demand recourse for mistreatment and abuse. His family successfully appealed to the British government to grant Abd El-Fattah UK citizenship on April 12, and he began to ask the Egyptian government for consular visits from British officials. On May 18, Abd El-Fattah was transferred to Wadi El-Natrun prison from Tora maximum security prison, where he was allegedly tortured and beaten by prison officials. In April 2024, PEN Canada joined 26 other human rights organizations in renewing calls for the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (UNWGAD) to take urgent action on behalf of Abd El-Fattah.

IRAN

A prominent journalist and human rights defender who has been repeatedly targeted by Iranian authorities since 2009, **Narges Mohammadi** was awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize “for her fight against the oppression of women in Iran and her fight to promote human rights and freedom for all.” Mohammadi is the author of *White Torture*, a two-volume book series investigating the inhumane treatment of prisoners in Iran and, as deputy director of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC), she has campaigned extensively against capital punishment in Iran.

In September 2008, Mohammadi was elected President of the Executive Committee of the National Council of Peace in Iran, a broad coalition against war and for the promotion of human rights. She has been banned from travelling abroad since 2009 and was arrested in 2010 for her work with the DHRC. She was convicted in 2011 and sentenced to 11 years in prison, later reduced to 6 years. After being released on bail in 2012, she faced further charges in 2014 after a widely publicized speech criticizing the mistreatment of inmates at Evin Prison. In May 2015, Mohammadi was arrested and sentenced to 16 years in prison for spreading propaganda against the system, gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security, and membership in an illegal organization whose aim is to harm national security. Mohammadi suffers from a neurological disorder that can result in seizures, temporary partial paralysis, and pulmonary embolism. Concerns for her health intensified following reports that she suffered several seizures in August and October 2015. Mohammadi is the mother of twin boys (born in November 2006), and the wife of prominent journalist and activist Taghi Rahmani, who himself has spent a total of 17 years in prison.

In May 2024, in a message posted on her Instagram page, Mohammadi drew attention to the plight of several women political prisoners in Evin Prison over the age of 60. “They endure imprisonment for the advancement of human rights,” she wrote, adding that “[a]s long as such mothers stand among the ranks of the activists, tyranny will fall, and the cause of freedom will stand strong...Mahavash Shahriari, Kobra Beigi, Raheleh Rahemi, and Nahid Taqavi stand as exemplars among the women fighters of the Evin Women’s Ward ..[t]hese mothers, in the 7th decade of their lives, bestow upon human history the blessings of freedom, equality, and the indomitable spirit of resistance against tyranny. ...[w]ith remarkable resilience, empathy, and solidarity, they stand alongside other prisoners, embodying the essence of political-ideological prisoners in their steadfast resistance.”

NASR SOTO

Nasrin Sotoudeh, an Iranian human rights lawyer who was awarded PEN Canada's One Humanity Award in 2011 and 2019, was released from Qarchak prison on November 15, 2023. A month earlier she had been severely beaten and arrested again at the funeral of Armita Geravand, 17, who died after being assaulted by the Tehran morality police.

RELEASE

IN UDEH

Sotoudeh has spent much of the last 10 years in prison serving multiple sentences related to her activism. In March 2024, she told Ms. Magazine that “Armita was the second girl that we officially know was killed for not wearing a veil. I think that the actual number of women and girls who’ve been killed [for this] is probably much, much higher. In Armita’s case, she’d lost her life very much in the same manner as Mahsa [Amini], in that sort of casual and gratuitous way.” She added: “I made the trip to her funeral without wearing a veil, and it was quite a long trip. I wanted to say that we women are everywhere — we’re in the metro, in restaurants, stadiums, streets, homes, everywhere, and we refuse to wear the veil, and you’re not going to erase us.” In May, she told the Guardian that although she has “faced constant legal sabotage that the judiciary system brings up against us,” she was “ready to return [to prison] whenever they say.”

ASED

CANADIAN AND LEGAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT

Lori Sterling and Grace Westcott

IN 2023, PEN CANADA'S BOARD IDENTIFIED THREE AREAS OF FOCUS FOR THE CANADIAN AND LEGAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE: ONLINE HARMS, DIGITAL TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION, AND BOOK BANNING.

In pursuit of these priorities, we have been reviewing the recently introduced Bill C-63, the Online Harms Bill, which addresses harmful online expression. We are tracking the Public Inquiry into Foreign Interference in Federal Electoral Processes and Democratic Institutions, known as the Hogue Inquiry, and Bill C-70, the Countering Foreign Interference Act, just introduced in May, 2024, for relevance to Digital Translational Repression (DTR). And we have been advocating for the intellectual freedom of libraries and schools against the limiting of access to books.

BILL C-63 ONLINE HARMS

Introduced on February 26, 2024, Bill C-63 is a great improvement over earlier efforts that, in 2021, were met with widespread disapproval. That said, PEN has several concerns about the Bill and we intend to participate in the expected public consultation after the Bill receives a second reading.

There are five parts to Bill C-63. The first part is the proposed Online Harms Act. The next two are amendments to the Canada Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code that address hate speech. The fourth and fifth parts are amendments to various acts consequential upon the first three.

The express purpose of the proposed Online Harms Act is to promote the online safety of persons in Canada, to mitigate the risk that they will be exposed to seven defined kinds of harmful content, and to reduce harms caused by such content. The goal is to enable the public to participate fully in public discourse, while respecting freedom of expression. The proposed Act is intended to contribute to the development of standards of online safety, and to ensure online operators are transparent and accountable.

Aimed at large public social media platforms, the Online Harms Act places the onus on platforms to “act responsibly,” “protect children,” “make certain offending content inaccessible,” “keep records,” and prepare and make public a digital safety plan. A particularly strong focus is protecting the physical and mental health of children, and providing remedies for the non-consensual communication of intimate images. Other harmful content to be addressed is material that incites violence or foments hatred, and content that incites violent extremism or terrorism.

While this part of the Bill is a step forward, we have concerns about the extensive powers of the Digital Safety Commission, the governing body under the Act. As the Act itself is only a framework, the work of fleshing out how the Act will work in practice is left in very great measure to the Commission’s regulation-making power. Of particular note is that the Act does not provide for oversight of the Commission itself — a recipe for abuse or ineffectuality, or both.

Our concerns about the proposed amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code are more fundamental.

The amendments to the Canadian Human Rights Act in Part 2 of the Bill reintroduce a hate speech provision (Section 13) enabling individuals to bring legal actions against other individuals, at no cost to themselves, with the possibility of monetary damages. This kind of action could be abused, as it has been in the past, not to mention it risks overwhelming the resources of the Human Rights Commission. In 2012, PEN Canada supported the removal of the previous Section 13 in the light of freedom of expression concerns.

The Criminal Code amendments in Part 3 of the Bill are even more concerning. Bill C-63 introduces a new crime of “offence motivated by hatred,” with a maximum sentence of life imprisonment, and substantially lengthens sentences for existing hate propaganda offences, including a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for advocating or promoting genocide. There is also a new recognizance provision allowing an individual to bring an application for a “peace bond” against another person where there are “reasonable grounds to believe” that person will commit a hate crime in the future — whether or not the defendant has ever committed an offence in the past. This raises all sorts of concerns about fairness and abuse.

The Online Harms Act addresses a critical need for policy in the digital arena, and legitimate concerns about the other two parts should not be a distraction from ensuring that the Act is the best it can be. **PEN has taken the position that both the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code amendments are not warranted and should be removed from the Bill.** We joined with several other interest groups in a letter to Arif Virani, Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada on May 7, 2024, suggesting just that.

For more detail on PEN’s views on Bill C-63, search for the article, Online Harms Bill: the good, the balanced and the alarming, by Grace Westcott, on the PEN Canada website. Or wait for our full submission.

DIGITAL TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION (DTR)

The Canadian and Legal Affairs Committee is reviewing the activity of the Hogue Inquiry into foreign interference, as it directly relates to the experience of writers in exile or writers who have immigrated to Canada and are experiencing DTR. As well, Canada has just announced the introduction of Bill C-70, which is intended to better equip the government to detect and protect against foreign interference threats in Canada.

PEN has retained a researcher this summer, Allison Zhao, to review and analyze the findings of the Hogue Inquiry as well as Bill C-70 to ensure that it meets our concerns on behalf of writers in exile facing DTR. Once this review is completed, PEN will be in a better position to take further steps on this important issue.

BOOK BANNING/CHALLENGES

While book banning — in Canada more properly called “book challenges” — is not the problem it is in the United States, we are on our guard and watching for creeping ideology and concerted, systematic practices that threaten the intellectual freedom of our schools and libraries. In February 2024, Jennifer Lanthier wrote an excellent piece on banned books for our website entitled, *You can't read that: Banning kids' books in Canada and the United States*. Brendan de Caires has participated on two panels on book banning this year, the first, *Shelf Control: A Dialogue on Harm Reduction, Diversity, and Freedom to Read*, as part of Freedom to Read Week in February; and the second hosted by McGill Friends of the Library in April. We have also written to the Toronto District Catholic School Board with our concerns about the introduction of an N-word protocol, which limits the inclusion of books using that word to Black writers. There is much more to come.

WRITERS IN PERIL COMMITTEE REPORT

Brendan de Caires

In 2022, for PEN's Day of the Imprisoned Writer, our late colleague Peter Showler wrote a letter to **José Rubén Zamora**, a Guatemalan publisher jailed on trumped-up money laundering charges. Instead of offering the usual earnest sentiments, Peter took an ironic approach, chiding Zamora for his bravery and integrity ("Why must you always speak out?") and for making the rest of us look like cowards. Charmingly, Mr. Zamora seems to have a similar sense of humour. When Freedom House observers visited him two months ago in a military prison he said: "Welcome to my place."

Although the original case against him was dismissed last year, state prosecutors have done their best to keep Mr. Zamora incarcerated while he awaits a retrial. Somehow, he remains hopeful. "I am in the hands of the judges," he told his visitors. "I will get out of here eventually." And yet, when Guatemala's new president, Bernardo Arévalo, offered to place him in a more comfortable cell before the retrial, Mr. Zamora refused: "I prefer to stay here with dignity."

Dignity is the common thread in many iconic PEN cases. When our honorary member **Narges Mohammadi** sent us a letter from Evin Prison to read at the 2023 Toronto International Festival of Authors, she wrote: “I am certain of our victory and equally certain of the religious dictatorship’s disintegration, collapse, and eventual demise. Rest assured that your support, people who love freedom of expression, and that of the wider world, will accelerate this process.” A few days later she was awarded the 2023 Nobel Peace Prize. When the news reached Evin, the women’s ward echoed with chants of “Woman, Life, Freedom” and her fellow inmates formed a circle to sing: “Hand in hand, we become a sea, a storm, a roar.”

Likewise, consider the words of our latest One Humanity Award winner, **Alaa Abd El-Fattah**, after meeting his newborn son, Khaled, during a prison visit. “My God! How come he’s so beautiful? Love at first touch! In half an hour he gave me joy enough to fill the prison for a week. In half an hour I gave him love I hoped would surround him for a week. In half an hour I changed and the universe changed around me. Now I understand why I’m in prison: they want to deprive me of joy. Now I understand why I will resist: *Prison will not stop my love, my happiness is resistance, holding Khaled is continuing the struggle.*”

Last year PEN Canada joined PEN International in calling for the release of **Ilham Tohti**, a Uyghur writer who bravely denounced the systemic discrimination faced by China’s ethnic minorities. Tohti was convicted of separatism and sentenced to life imprisonment following a two-day trial in September 2014, despite the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention ruling his detention to be arbitrary. This year will mark the 10th anniversary of his unjust imprisonment.

WRITERS IN PERIL COMMITTEE REPORT

On September 23, our centre marked the grim anniversary of the 2001 arrest of Dawit Isaak, along with at least ten other independent Eritrean journalists. All of them remain honorary members of PEN Canada. Dawit co-founded the newspaper *Setit* with our late colleague Aaron Berhane. At our invitation, Judith Abitan and Irwin Cotler of the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights (RWCHR) penned an Op-Ed for *The Globe and Mail* urging governments to “support the call of UN experts for the urgent and unconditional release of Mr. Isaak and his colleagues, invoke the Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations ... and prioritize this case at the forthcoming High-Level Forum on Arbitrary Detention.” In 2021, PEN joined an international coalition headed by the RWCHR calling for targeted Magnitsky Sanctions against senior Eritrean officials for their role in imprisoning Dawit and his colleagues.

Our members will recall that PEN has been working with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) as a trusted referral partner, identifying candidates for the special Global Human Rights Defender immigration stream. Facing threats, torture, arbitrary arrest, and assassination in their home countries, the program offers the opportunity to resettle in Canada as government-assisted refugees to a limited number of human rights defenders and their families, including human rights advocates, humanitarian workers, and, notably for PEN, journalists. In 2023, IRCC simplified this process, allowing PEN to refer candidates for assessment directly to ProtectDefenders.eu, who then verify and process the cases. Our most recent referral did not proceed due to technical reasons, but the stream remains open to us for other HRDs in need of rescue.

PEN continues to resist digital transnational repression (DTR) — the efforts made by authoritarian regimes to threaten and intimidate nationals living outside their borders, including in Canada. This is not an abstract issue for our centre, as several members of our Writers in Exile community have faced persistent harassment since their arrival in Canada. DTR was identified as a PEN priority last year, and was the theme of our 2023 Annual Report. This past year, the government launched a public inquiry into foreign interference in federal elections chaired by the Honourable Marie-Josée Hogue. In March 2024, the Hogue Inquiry found plain evidence of election interference and intimidation of diaspora communities within Canada. We are currently researching how other countries have tackled DTR, with a view to publishing guidance about the range of policies and best practices that Canada could adopt.

PEN CONTINUES TO RESIST DIGITAL TRANSNATIONAL REPRESSION (DTR) — THE EFFORTS MADE BY AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES TO THREATEN AND INTIMIDATE NATIONALS LIVING OUTSIDE THEIR BORDERS, INCLUDING IN CANADA. THIS IS NOT AN ABSTRACT ISSUE FOR OUR CENTRE, AS SEVERAL MEMBERS OF OUR WRITERS IN EXILE COMMUNITY HAVE FACED PERSISTENT HARASSMENT SINCE THEIR ARRIVAL IN CANADA.

PUBLIC
EVENTS
REPORT
AND
PRIZES
2023

Anouchka Freybe

Since mid-2020, PEN Canada has been evolving our events strategy to focus on membership, new public engagement, and collaboration. Partnerships with TIFA (Toronto International Festival of Authors), CBC Ideas, Calgary's Wordfest, the Centre for Free Expression at TMU (Toronto Metropolitan University), along with schools, libraries and independent booksellers have led to more opportunities for repeat gatherings, new PEN advocates, and new organizational friendships. While large-format galas could one day return as a vehicle for fundraising and connection, several changes over the past three years have led to a dynamic shift in how we realize our advocacy with and for individuals and groups across multiple disciplines.

We are committed to improving transparency on how PEN works behind the scenes, and how global emergencies correlate to conditions experienced by writers, journalists, and academics in Canada. Our events calendar will continue to evolve, stewarding awareness for issues that impede freedom of thought and expression, and cultivate relationships in local, regional and national spaces.

Over the last year, our events foregrounded our campaign pillars — **Intellectual Freedom (Book Banning), Digital Transnational Repression, and Disinformation and Online Harms** — through two streams: free programming to engage membership, patrons and the public, and ticketed programs that support PEN's operations, along with those of our partners.

Events are an opportunity for unscripted conversation with notable, charismatic writers and creatives — from filmmakers and screenwriters, to diplomats and researchers. Some of our most popular events showcase the thriving Writers in Exile community, which organized four free readings in Toronto and held a launch event for **The Uncaged Voice: Stories by Writers in Exile**, their beautiful anthology published by Cormorant Books. Our major ticketed event, the annual **Graeme Gibson Talk**, a tribute to the legacy of the PEN Canada cofounder, once again played to a sold-out audience.

PEN continued its co-sponsorship of the ongoing series **In Conversation**, an online event developed by the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) at TMU. Over a dozen panel discussions throughout the year explored topics ranging from Putin's war, AI's influence on democracy and freedom of expression, book banning in schools, and the rise of antisemitism in Canada.

PEN Canada is only as strong as its multiple supporters, partners, and new voices. Our events strategy continues to evolve to address national alignment and engagement on matters that support the writer, the reader, the speaker, and the human right to intellectual freedom.

EVENTS AND PRIZES

LITERARY EVENTS

Raising Our Voices: Awards and Readings *September 23*

Held at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, this ceremony celebrated four annual awards and drew attention to imprisoned and imperiled writers across the world.

Three award winners traveled to the event to accept their award on stage. The fourth award was accepted by Sanaa Seif, who flew in to accept on behalf of her brother, Alaa Abd El-Fattah, who remains imprisoned in Egypt. An empty chair was placed onstage to honour him.

Each award was followed by a reading from a persecuted writer, read in solidarity by acclaimed writers from Canada and beyond: Ashley Audrain, Louise Dennys, Masha Gessen, John Irving, Andrey Kurkov, Vincent Lam, Kyo Maclear, Carol Off, Anna Porter, and our president, Grace Westcott. The event was hosted by Garvia Bailey.

Third Annual Graeme Gibson Talk Notes On An Invasion: Masha Gessen and Andrey Kurkov in conversation *September 24*

Kurkov, one of Ukraine's most celebrated writers and a member of PEN Ukraine, worked as a journalist in Ukraine and did military service as a prison warden in Odessa. New Yorker staff writer Gessen is a renowned Russian-American journalist and thinker who has written widely on Russia's descent into totalitarianism.

A Marquee event at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, Margaret Atwood introduced the authors, who each had urgent knowledge of the ongoing war in Ukraine. The conversation was moderated by Nahlah Ayed, and is available as a podcast from CBC Radio Ideas.

WRITERS IN EXILE EVENTS

The **Voices of Freedom** reading series continued with four more installations, regularly filling every seat in the Hirut Cafe and Restaurant in Toronto. Hosted by novelist, scriptwriter, and director Keith Ross Leckie, these events are organized by PEN Canada's Writers in Exile community.

March 26:

Ava Homa (Iran), John Jonaid (Myanmar), Luis Horacio Nájera (Mexico), and Bilal Sarwary (Afghanistan).

September 24:

Dilan Qadir (Kurdistan-Sorani), Jackleen Hanna (Syria), Ahmet Dogan (Turkey) and Kamel Riahi (Tunisia).

November 26:

Bushra Elfadil (Sudan), Kiran Nazish (Pakistan), Alexander Duarte (Venezuela) and Luis Horacio Nájera (Mexico).

March 24, 2024:

Diary Marif (Kurdistan/Iraq), Tien Providence (St. Vincent & the Grenadines), Lidiia Karpenko (Ukraine), Paul Kumoni (Kenya) and Pedro Restrepo (Colombia).

Book Launch Event, The Uncaged Voice: Stories by Writers in Exile

October 24, 2023

Ben McNally Books' new Queen Street location burst with guests, peers, friends and family as the Writers in Exile members launched their new anthology. The night kicked off with speeches from the publishers (Cormorant Books), PEN Canada program chair Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie, and president Grace Westcott. A well-queued book signing concluded the night.

EVENTS AND PRIZES

PANELS ON FREE EXPRESSION

Shelf Control: A dialogue on harm reduction, diversity and freedom to read

February 22

Panelists: Danny Ramadan (author), Johanna Gibson-Lawler (Ontario School Libraries Association), Kasey Meehan (PEN America), Michelle Arbuckle (Ontario Library Association), Sonia Bebbington (Ottawa Public Library). Moderated by Brendan de Caires (PEN Canada).

Library professionals, authors and information sector experts reflected on contested books, bad faith challenges, presumption of access, new frameworks around freedom of expression in libraries, and how to support intellectual freedom without bringing harm to marginalized communities.

Black Bodies, White Spaces

February 28

Panelists: Jennifer Holness, Jennifer Hosten and Cheryl Thompson.

Sixty years after the US Civil Rights Movement, many artists, writers and culture workers still contend with the power dynamics of “white spaces” that discount and devalue Black contributions and marginalize nonwhite histories and narratives. A discussion was held on the challenges of negotiating these spaces, and reflections on the complex intersections of race, art and culture in the 21st century.

Set in Toronto’s Davenport neighbourhood, this event was co-produced with Sutherland House Press and Hungry Eyes Media. An empty chair was present, honouring Narges Mohammadi.

**In Conversation, an online series presented
by the Centre for Free Expression (CFE),
co-sponsored by PEN Canada**

**Putin's War Against Journalists:
One Year Later**

April 19

Russian journalists Ekaterina Kotrikadze, Alexey Kovalev and Maxim Trudolyubov were joined by Chris Brown (CBC) and moderator Julian Sher (CBC) to discuss how they've refused to be silenced one year into the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**Ethnic Nationalism & Academic
Freedom: The Study of China**

May 3

As challenges grow for scholars of China, Andrew Nathan, Meg Rithmire, and Rory Truex asked when does critical disagreement become an attack on academic freedom? What can universities do to protect the integrity of scholarly work? Moderated by Henry Reichman.

**Confronting the New Wave
of Antisemitism**

May 16

Philip Slayton in conversation with Samir Gandesha on the resurgence of antisemitism alongside social media, identity politics, and populism, and Slayton's new book, *Antisemitism: An ancient hatred in the age of identity politics*.

**Silencing Across Borders:
Governments Threaten Canadian
Writers & Journalists**

June 6

Siena Anstis, Chris Tenove, Kiran Nazish, and Sheng Xue discussed the consequences of Digital Transnational Repression and what Canada can do to fight it. Moderated by Julian Sher.

**Canada Proposes Foreign Influence
Registry: A lot could go wrong!**

September 20

The Honourable Yuen Pau Woo in conversation with Meghan McDermott on Canada's recent proposal for a foreign influence registry and what should be done to address the problem of foreign interference.

EVENTS AND PRIZES

What Will AI Mean for Free Expression?

October 3

Summer Lopez, Seher Shafiq, and Salil Tripathi discussed artificial intelligence as a powerful curator of information and arbiter of online content. Moderated by Brenda McPhail.

Exploring Systemic Islamophobia in Canada

October 24

Anver Emon, Syed Adnan Hussein, Naseem Mithoowani examined how Islamophobia is enabled, perpetuated, and even rendered respectable in Canada. Moderated by Fahad Ahmed.

Governing AI Democratically in Canada

November 2

Bianca Wylie in conversation with Andrew Clement on how Canada might best govern AI, the most controversial and poorly understood technological development in recent times.

Banning Books in Schools

November 11

Writers and high school students Dáminí Awóyígà, Jayreece Whiley, and Micaiah Aladejebi discussed bans in their school libraries and curriculum and what schools, students, and the community should do. Moderated by El Jones.

Can Artificial Intelligence Be Regulated?

December 7

Fenwick McKelvey, Christelle Tessono, and Anna Jahn on the possibility of regulating AI to maximize its benefits for society while minimizing its harms. Moderated by Brenda McPhail.

How Can the Charter Protect Freedom of Expression When Digital Platforms Control the Public Square?

January 23

Emily Laidlaw, Michael Geist, and Sujit Choudhry discussed protecting democratic rights and freedoms when private digital platforms increasingly govern arenas for public discourse. Moderated by Kristopher Kinsinger.

**On Blackness and Belonging:
Reflections on Racism in Canada and
the United States**

February 6

Debra Thompson in conversation with Vershawn Young on the perspectives gained from having lived in both countries.

**Finding a Way Forward for Jews and
Palestinians in this Terrible Time**

March 19

Raja Khouri and Jeffrey Wilkinson in conversation with Mira Sucharov, on what can be done to bring North American Palestinian and Jewish communities together.

**SCREENINGS CO-SPONSORED
BY PEN CANADA**

The Grab, at Hot Docs

March 10

Screened during the 2023 Human Rights Watch Film Festival, this global thriller from the director of *Blackfish* combines journalism with character-driven storytelling. A conversation with the filmmakers Gabriela Cowperthwaite and Jennifer Baichwal followed the screening.

Midnight's Children, for CanFilmDay
April 19

Two children are born at the stroke of midnight on August 15, 1947, the very moment that India claimed its independence from Great Britain. Switched at birth in the hospital, the boys must live out each other's intended fates through the tumultuous 20th century. Deepa Mehta joined post-screening for a Q&A with the audience.

Letter to a Shadow

September 26

A harrowing account of the life and death of the filmmaker's father, Héctor Abad Gómez, a Colombian pioneer in the field of public health and a vehement defender of human rights who was assassinated by a hitman on the streets of Medellín in 1987. An audience Q&A with film co-director Hector Abad Faciolince preceded the screening.

EVENTS AND PRIZES

Ageless International Film Festival:
Freedom of Expression 2023 screening
of International Dawn Chorus Day
October 29

Set on International Dawn Chorus Day in 2020, birds from six continents join an online video call. The film raises common political issues of queer people through the most popular communication tool of the pandemic: the video call. In the film, the birds gossip about storms and cats and wires—and also discuss the fate of some activists they’ve seen in prisons. The screening was followed by a discussion with the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson, filmmaker John Greyson, John Ralston Saul, and filmmaker Leena Manimekalai. Kaveh Shahrooz moderated.

AWARDS

RBC PEN Canada New Voices Award
Winner: Christine Wu, a poet living in
Kjipuktuk (Halifax)

The jury citation describes Christine Wu’s entry as “a deeply moving and masterfully crafted collection of poems that surpasses the boundaries of memory, love, family, and personal growth. The writer’s exquisite precision and grace, infused with profound wisdom, skillfully navigates the delicate art of letting go, effortlessly weaving the tapestry of past and present.”

Wu accepted her award at our ceremony on Sept. 23, and later read at our poetry readings in Toronto and Montreal. As part of the prize, Wu is receiving a year-long mentorship from Larissa Lai, winner of Jim Duggins Novelist’s Prize and finalist for the Governor General’s Award. Wu has since secured a publisher for her debut collection of poems, *Familial Hungers* (Brick Books, 2025). The award had nearly 300 entries.

Past winners

Claire Battershill
Emily Izsak
Nadine Sander-Green
Laura Legge
Mikko Harvey
Jaclyn Desforges
Noor Naga
Em Dial
Deepa Rajagopalan
Fareh Malik

KEN FILKOW PRIZE

Winner: Brandi Morin, journalist and film documentarian

Hailing from Treaty 6 territory in Alberta, Brandi Morin has for over a decade reported on Indigenous land and environmental rights, Truth and Reconciliation, and residential school grave discoveries. Her work is informed by her experience as a survivor of the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) crisis.

Her freedom of expression was challenged in August, 2023, when she was grabbed and threatened by a police officer in the course of reporting for Ricochet Media on an environmental blockade at Fairy Creek. In 2021, Brandi was also reportedly the subject of RCMP surveillance along with other journalists.

Months after receiving this award, Brandi was the subject of police allegations, arrest, and charges were laid against her while reporting on a homeless encampment raid. With her publisher, Ricochet Media, leading the way, PEN Canada joined a coalition of human rights and journalistic freedom orgs to demand that the charges be dropped and warning of the risks to journalistic freedom. On March 1, the charges were withdrawn.

Past winners

Franke James
Raihan Abir
Desmond Cole
Justin Brake
Tim Bousquet
Amy Lai
Amber Bracken

EVENTS AND PRIZES

MARIE-ANGE GARRIGUE PRIZE

Winner:

Joan Leishman

In addition to her accomplished work as a CBC veteran journalist, Joan Leishman has for over a decade supported refugee writers as a volunteer with several resettlement charities and also by opening her home to give refugees shelter.

The Marie-Ange Garrigue Prize recognizes a Canadian who has provided significant help to a writer or journalist outside Canada and helped to spare them from threats, violence, harassment, or imprisonment for reporting or commenting on issues of public interest. Now in its second year, the prize honours the memory of the late Marie-Ange Garrigue, who practiced law in Canada for many years and was deeply committed to independent opinion and expression. This is the second PEN Canada prize generously funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton — the first is the Ken Filkow Prize.

Past winner

Mariam Al Zier

ONE HUMANITY AWARD

Winner:

Alaa Abd El-Fattah

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is an Egyptian software developer, blogger and pro-democracy activist who rose to prominence during the 2010 Arab Spring. He has long been the target of the Egyptian government for his protests and incitements for free speech and has spent most of the past decade behind bars. In spite of being granted UK citizenship in 2022 and a subsequent hunger strike, Egyptian officials continue to refuse to release him. For more details on Alaa Abd El-Fattah, please consult the Honorary Members section.

Introduced in 2006, the One Humanity Award is presented by the members of PEN Canada to a writer whose work transcends the boundaries of national divides and inspires connections across cultures.

Past recipients

Jiang Weiping Zarganar

Lydia Cacho

Nasrin Sotoudeh

Dieu Cay

Raif Badawi

Eskinder Nega

Azimjon Askarov

Ashraf Fayadh

Nasrin Sotoudeh

George Brown College

SUPPORT FOR WRITERS IN EXILE

Writer-in-Residence

Recipient: Shams Erfan, Hazara refugee from Afghanistan

Born and raised in the Jaghori district of Ghazni province, Erfan worked as an English teacher at a local school before fleeing Afghanistan in late 2014 following direct threats from the Taliban. During his eight years in refugee camps in Indonesia, he taught English to fellow refugees and worked as a volunteer interpreter for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

Erfan was first chosen as the 2022/2023 Writer-in-Residence, but was asked by George Brown College to come back for a second year, concluding in April 2024. Over the two years, he visited more than 140 classes across various departments and fields of study.

Humber School for Writers Writer-in-Residence

Recipient: Dilan Qadir, Kurdish Canadian writer

PEN Canada maintains a full scholarship to the Humber School for Writers' graduate certificate program in creative writing, meant for a member of the Writers in Exile community. Under the guidance of David Bezmozgis (writer, filmmaker; Creative Director, Humber School for Writers), 2023 recipient Dilan Qadir worked on his first novel: a fictional account of an Iraqi family living under the American occupation in 2003.

Qadir grew up in Darbandikhan in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. Fearing for his safety, Qadir came to Canada in 2014 and now lives in Vancouver, BC, on Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh unceded territories. He holds a BA in English from Sulaimani University, was a Writer in Residence at the Caetani Centre, and has had his poems longlisted for the Vera Manuel Award for Poetry.

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