

I HOPE
THIS
LETTER
FINDS YOU
WELL.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

I hope this letter finds you well.

Letters have always been a means to create connection, to reach beyond ourselves, particularly before the internet and phones existed. For much of humanity, letter writing was the means for communicating with others at a distance. A letter asking about the well-being of the addressees wouldn't be answered for weeks, sometimes months. Most of us have lost this waiting, this longing, as our technology has developed, but for some, like imprisoned writers, letter writing is still an important way of finding and maintaining connection with people on the outside. Because so much of PEN Canada's work is helping exiled and/or imprisoned writers, letter writing has maintained its relevance and importance for PEN.

In this report, you'll find a letter from Madeleine Thien to Jimmy Lai, an imprisoned writer and newspaper publisher in Hong Kong whom she has never met, and yet feels kinship with. Other writers who have included letters in this report, like Mostafa Al-A'sar and Maryam Shafipour, are exiled writers now living in Canada—they chose to write letters to writers still imprisoned in their home countries of Egypt and Iran, to remind those writers that people on the outside are fighting for them and keeping the hope of their safety and release alive.

"I hope this finds you well," the theme of this year's annual report, seeks to find connection in all sorts of ways, through PEN's mission of fighting censorship, helping free persecuted writers from prison, assisting exiled writers who live in Canada, and promoting literature. The work of PEN Canada continues and it's never been more important, as more and more writers are censored globally for standing up for what they believe. These letters are the perfect accompaniment to the reports, which showcase the continuing important work that's already being done at PEN Canada, work that needs to continue being supported, so that it can grow and create more change. These times continue to be hard, but if there's something we can take from the letters in this report, it is to continue to hope that things can change, and that hope must be active. Let's support imprisoned writers, let's be a little more active in our communities, a little braver, and a little more oriented towards justice.

In solidarity,

Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Grace Westcott

This is my last missive as president of PEN Canada. My four years at the helm end in June, when the membership elects a new president. I leave as we stand together with our sister centre, PEN Québec, on the cusp of one hundred years as the Canadian centre of PEN International in 2026. It is a momentous milestone.

It has been the privilege of a lifetime serving as PEN Canada's 23rd president, the latest in a roster of champions of Can Lit and free expression that I am proud to be counted among. Canada is a country of immense writing and publishing talent. Nurturing it is a challenge to which the country and PEN Canada have always risen; it has been our great good fortune to do so in a climate of freedom.

Defending free expression is a never-ending project. We have always striven to speak out where voices have been repressed in Canada, whether by government bodies or by members of civil society. We have sought to raise up the voices of exiled writers who come to live among us, while speaking out in defence of imprisoned writers around the world.

We recognize that freedom of expression is a stern discipline, difficult both to practice and to defend. It demands a great deal of each of us personally, to stand up for the right of others to express ideas with which we may profoundly disagree. That's the nub of it, the acid test of our convictions. We stand for the freedom to read and write, without regard to the views expressed. We know that, unless there is free expression for all, there is free expression for none. We know that diversity of viewpoint and strenuous public debate is to all our benefits, and key to a vibrant and free country. It's what we believe in.

Now, with the rise of authoritarianism in democracies around the world – most alarmingly in the US – we as Canadians are moved to step up to defend the values of our democracy, of which freedom of expression is perhaps the most fundamental, essential to all the rest.

In the last few months, we’ve been seeing something new arise in our national image: the Assertive Canadian.

As we all know, the last two lines of our national anthem are “Oh Canada, we stand on guard for thee.” We repeat it twice, for emphasis. We have glibly made this promise since first warbling the words in our grade school assemblies as kids, or at our citizenship ceremonies as new Canadians. Now, global events have hit home, and call on us with a newfound sense of immediacy, to guard what matters most to us.

PEN is ready. As I hand the baton to a new president, and as the centennial anniversary of the Canadian centre of PEN International approaches, PEN Canada has the leadership, the will, the resources; a trained, knowledgeable, and dedicated staff; and the support of firm friends and members, like you, to lead a campaign to assert the values that we have stood for, for almost one hundred years.

I want to thank all my colleagues on the board of PEN Canada, past and present, who have, over the past four years, given countless hours, forthright honesty, and much deliberate thought to the work of PEN. Our debates have made PEN stronger. I’d like to recognize the members of our Advisory Council, who have given me the benefit of their counsel when I have grappled with difficult issues. I want to thank our staff, Brendan de Caires, Theresa Johnson, and Eilish Waller, for their talent, commitment and hard work in promoting the mission of PEN. And lastly, I would like to thank the many longtime friends, members, and supporters of PEN, in many cases relationships enduring over decades, whose readiness to engage in PEN’s work, loyalty and love of PEN and what it stands for, have been a continuing gift to our organization, and a source of deep inspiration to me. Thank you.

IN THE LAST FEW
MONTHS, WE’VE
BEEN SEEING
SOMETHING NEW
ARISE IN OUR
NATIONAL IMAGE:
THE ASSERTIVE
CANADIAN.

UNIVERSAL
DECLARATION
OF HUMAN
RIGHTS

A.1

ARTICLE 19



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.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Brendan de Caires

“Make that make sense!” Justin Trudeau’s anguished comment on Trump’s tariffs could serve equally well for much of last year. A sundowning American president refusing to step aside until he had humiliated himself in a televised debate, his replacement installed without primaries, his successor, a racist felon, returning to office eager to vandalize the country’s legal system, government, economy, and international alliances. None of it made sense.

Biden defended Ukraine tenaciously but his chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan abandoned its civil society, and left thousands of writers and journalists to a vengeful Taliban. Shamefully, he fist-bumped the Saudi prince who directed the murder and dismemberment of a Washington Post columnist. Worse yet, he credulously repeated disinformation about beheaded babies, dithered over ceasefires, and readily approved billions in weapons sales for the obliteration of Gaza. The unconscionably brutal military campaign that the US has funded there has now killed tens of thousands of civilians, including 176 journalists and media workers according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. (By March 2024 the acronym WCNSF – Wounded Child, No Surviving Family was reportedly applicable to 17,000 Palestinian children.) As Omar El Akkad has written, in one of the few honest moral reckonings with this lunatic carnage: “One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This.”

Trump’s early moves against judges, universities, and the media suggest that few of America’s vaunted freedoms will survive his second term unscathed. His administration has begun to purge “woke” vocabulary from federal documents, rooting out such lexical miscreants as “accessible,” “Black,” “climate crisis,” “Gulf of Mexico,” “immigrants,” “transgender,” and “women.” This Orwellian aperitif was swiftly followed by a full menu of Kafkaesque indelicacies: masked men abducting student protestors, legally questionable deportations, an apparent suspension of habeas corpus, the exclusion of unsympathetic media from the White House, and North Korea-style cabinet meetings with fawning minions competitively praising the Great Leader.

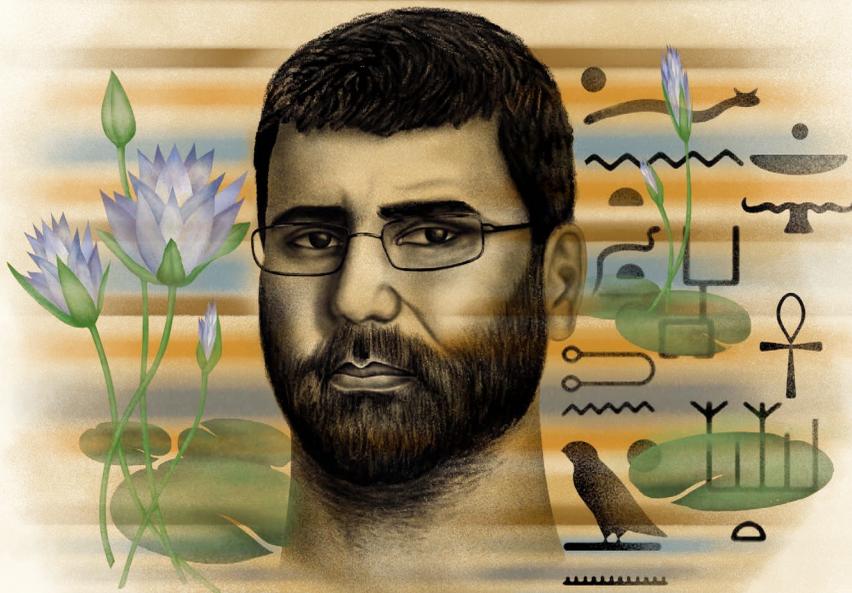
The downspiral of American democracy will embolden illiberal attitudes in Canada. PEN must resist these, whether they arrive in the form of book challenges, disinformation, coercion towards ideological conformity, or the many provocations of disinhibited prejudice. None of these problems are new. Eighty years ago, Theodor Adorno presciently warned that the “conversion of all questions of truth into questions of power not only suppresses truth [but attacks] the very heart of the distinction between true and false.” In simpler terms, one might say that the gap between power and truth should always be kept at least as wide as the Gulf of Mexico.

Against this backdrop, the writers that PEN Canada supports seem more significant than ever. Our 2024 One Humanity Award went to the uncommonly brave Hong Kong publisher Jimmy Lai, a man who has defied China’s oppressive National Security Law despite facing what may amount to a life sentence for doing so. Our Ken Filkow Prize for defending free expression in Canada went to Toronto Star ombud Shree Paradkar for her “active and committed support of young journalists of colour”, and for her fearless commentary on politically divisive issues despite “constant criticism and harassment.”

Our Marie-Ange Garrigue Prize, for helping a foreign writer, jointly acknowledged Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) for their urgent “evacuation, relocation, and resettlement of over 500 at-risk journalists” after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, and Robina Aryubwal, a women’s rights activist and former Afghan refugee, who managed key parts of that process. Our RBC/PEN Canada New Voices competition received more than 560 submissions; Nancy Huggett’s *Revelation* won, a poetry collection that our jurors praised for its “interplay of illness and healing, making and breaking (strokes that create paintings and explode brains), and in the delicate engagement with the religion theme implied in the title.” Our awards ceremony was also graced with three arresting monologues that paid tribute to women protesters in Iran, written by Fereshteh Molavi and performed by Banafsheh Taherian.

I have been blessed with talented colleagues throughout my time at PEN, never more so than with our Director of Operations, Theresa Johnson, and our Communications Coordinator, Eilish Waller. My heartfelt thanks to both for their commitment to the mission, diligence, patience, and good cheer. Sincere thanks to Grace Westcott, our outgoing president, who has led the centre through a difficult period, done her utmost to manage deep differences of opinion among the board with tact and civility, and transformed our governance and communications. She has worked tirelessly behind the scenes to improve all aspects of PEN’s operations, and volunteered herself for innumerable tasks that keep the office running efficiently. For this, and for her unflagging support, the entire staff owe her a debt of gratitude.

DEAR ALAA,



I HOPE
THIS LETTER
FINDS YOU
UNDEFEATED.

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is a British-Egyptian writer and activist, and author of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated*. In September 2024 he completed a 5-year politically-motivated prison sentence, yet authorities refused to release him. He remains held in Wadi el-Natrun Prison.

I hope this message finds you well.

That's how letters usually begin—with good wishes. But I know you're not well, locked away in that bleak cell. In fact, this letter may never even reach you. Forgive us for how little we can do.

Mahmoud Darwish once wrote: *"We do what prisoners do, And what the jobless do: We raise hope!"*

Raising hope—what a difficult thing. And yet, it's often all we have to stop ourselves from collapsing under the weight of madness and meaninglessness. I know how much you've endured—physically, mentally, and in your unwavering resistance. No words can console you, and no one can claim to truly understand what you feel. Only the wounded know the pain of a wound.

Just a few months ago, Bashar al-Assad's regime fell. Can you believe it? The butcher fled, like a panicked mouse fleeing its predator. The man they once called "eternal" is gone. That so-called eternity has collapsed, leaving behind a nation in pain, thousands of victims, the dead, the disappeared, the imprisoned. But he fell. Syria is free, and the prisons have opened. Some of the disappeared even came back, people we had all assumed were lost forever.

The only constant in life is change, relentless and unstoppable, even when everything seems still. I'm writing to you now from exile in Canada. Just a few years ago, I was with you in prison, passing through some of the same cells that have become chapters in your long and painful journey: the Cairo pretrial detention center Tora Tahqiq, Anbar Alzera'a Prison, the Farm Prison Al-Mazra'a Prison. I never imagined I'd end up here, and I still don't know how all the years and days slipped by—through the prison walls and into exile. But in the end, I found freedom. True, it's freedom in exile, far from my homeland, my family, my friends—but it's freedom all the same.

And I believe, my friend, that your freedom is coming, inevitably, and soon. Not because I'm naive or trying to console you, but because it's how life works. Darwish wrote:

"O you with the bleeding eyes and hands, This night will pass.

The holding cell will not last, Nor the chains of iron.

Nero died, but Rome lived on—Fighting through her eyes.

One grain of wheat may die, But it will fill the valley with grain."

Dear Alaa, you are still standing—you have not been defeated.

I truly hope this letter reaches you and finds you in strength. We are all waiting for you. We are waiting for the day your freedom arrives—and I believe it's near.

With love,

Mostafa Al-A'sar

Mostafa Al-A'sar is a human rights journalist from Egypt, where he was imprisoned for over three years. He lives in Toronto.

WRITERS IN EXILE COMMITTEE REPORT

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie, Chair

***Reclaiming the Voice:
Writers in Exile and the Global Struggle
for Free Expression***

In a world where free expression is increasingly under threat, the importance of community, solidarity, and literary resistance has never been more vital. The annual report of PEN Canada’s Writers in Exile program is a powerful reminder that the written word—despite censorship, persecution, and displacement—cannot be silenced.

As Chair of this resilient collective, it is an honour to reflect on the significance of our assembly—a gathering that is both celebratory and sobering. We come together not only to acknowledge our journeys as exiled writers but also to confront the urgent realities that continue to threaten freedom of speech across the globe.

Many of us arrived in Canada seeking refuge from regimes that criminalize thought and suppress creativity. Yet even here, where constitutional freedoms are protected, we see troubling signs: books being banned, dissenting voices sidelined, and digital surveillance tightening its grip on public discourse. These are not isolated incidents but symptoms of a broader global effort to control narratives and distort truth.

In defiance of this suppression, we write. In exile, we have not only found new homes but renewed purpose. Events like the Voices of Freedom reading series—ongoing for the past three years in Toronto’s east end—are more than literary showcases; they are acts of resistance. They send a clear message: exile cannot erase identity. Forced silence cannot drown out truth. And language—no matter how dispersed across borders—can still unite, heal, and empower.

LITERATURE IS NOT MERELY WORDS ON A PAGE; IT IS THE LIVING TESTIMONY OF THOSE WHO DARE TO SPEAK. IT REFLECTS THE RISKS TAKEN TO BRING TRUTH TO LIGHT AND THE COMMUNITIES FORMED TO PROTECT AND PRESERVE THAT TRUTH.

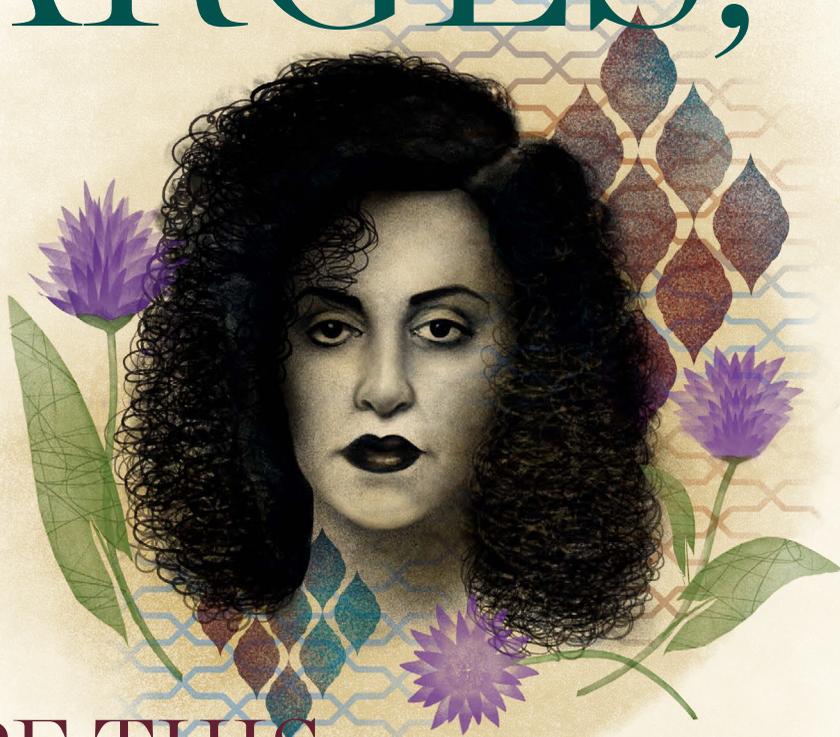
During the past three years, this gathering, held at the welcoming Hirut Jazz Cafe, stood as a beacon of resilience and hope. The generosity of community spaces like Hirut, and the steadfast support of individuals such as Tibebe and Hirut themselves, embody the grassroots solidarity that sustains exiled artists. Their commitment, alongside the tireless efforts of PEN Canada's team—including senior mentors, volunteer leaders, and especially Theresa and Eilish—reminds us that our voices matter, and that we are never truly alone.

Literature is not merely words on a page; it is the living testimony of those who dare to speak. It reflects the risks taken to bring truth to light and the communities formed to protect and preserve that truth. As we continue our reading series, share our experiences, and listen deeply to one another, we are doing more than storytelling—we are asserting our right to exist, to speak, and to be heard.

In this spirit, let us keep writing, supporting one another, and defending the principles of free expression wherever they are threatened. Let our gatherings reaffirm the truth: while regimes may exile writers, they can never exile the truth.

As we look to the future, may our pens remain unbroken, our voices be ever louder, and our stories be forever woven into the fabric of freedom. Under the umbrella of PEN, we strive to carry forward the values of free expression and democratic society. We also call on the broader culture and society to listen—to recognize in us the living witnesses of what undemocratic systems can do to both individuals and nations.

DEAR NARGES,



I HOPE THIS
LETTER FINDS
YOU IN GOOD
SPIRITS.

Narges Mohammadi is an Iranian journalist, human rights defender, Nobel Laureate, and author of *White Torture*. In December 2024, while serving a 16-year sentence, she was temporarily released from Evin Prison on medical grounds. PEN is concerned that she will be reimprisoned.

Writing this letter is a difficult and beautiful experience. Difficult, because words fall short in the face of the greatness of your heart and your will. And beautiful, because each word feels like a bridge between two hearts that have been beating together for freedom, dignity, and love for years.

Your passionate spirit has created a wave of solidarity—a tide of brave, conscious women whose joined hearts form a roaring flood that tears through injustice and oppression.

Many people often ask me, how has Narges endured such hardship for all these years? How can she bear being away from her children for so long?

So I share a story you once shared with me of a woman you met in Zanjan Prison, when you were exiled there as punishment.

You told me that that woman embraced you as soon as you arrived, knew your name, and told you that her brother had spoken of your courage. She had been on death row for 11 years, living every night with the nightmare of the noose. And she told you, “You are the only glimmer of hope I have that one day I will walk out of this prison and see the sky again.”

And she was not alone, Narges. Throughout the years, you have encountered so many innocent souls whose hope for a better life was tied to your struggle.

But I do not claim you are an angel. I have no intention of sanctifying you.

You are, in the truest sense of the word, a human being, with a heart that beats for others, who believes in the worth of every person, and in the strength and will hidden within each of us to defeat the impossible.

Your power comes from your ability to love. This is why people connect with you.

No one else can bring people together from different beliefs, backgrounds, and identities, and unite their hearts beneath one banner, as you do, gathering them in solidarity against darkness and injustice.

Perhaps this is why tyrants fear you.

Your fight for human rights, despite the immense sacrifices, reflects a deeper beauty—the beauty that comes from dedicating oneself to a greater cause. You have taught us that true beauty lies in helping others, in making the world a better place for everyone, even if it means sacrificing personal joy. Your life is a testament to the power of giving, to creating a beauty that is shared by all.

You have redefined dignity, grace, and humanity. After years of oppression and imprisonment, you still offer unconditional, boundless love.

And as you once said: “We have so much work ahead. Our real work begins when the walls of these prisons fall. When at last, we can share love, freely and fully, with our fellow human beings.”

I am endlessly proud of you and I am grateful to call you my friend.

I truly believe in the power of the solidarity between us.

With love,



Maryam Shafipour is a human rights activist from Iran, where she was imprisoned for two years. She lives in Canada.

WRITERS IN PERIL REPORT

This report is being prepared 60 days into a hunger strike by Egyptian pro-democracy activist Alaa Abd El-Fattah. Since the beginning of March, he has consumed nothing except herbal tea, black coffee, and rehydration salts. This desperate act has been undertaken in order to secure access to a lawyer and the right to receive consular visits (he is a British national). On May 1, PEN International president Burhan Sönmez raised concerns about Alaa's deteriorating health and noted that he and his mother, Laila – already hospitalized for her own ongoing hunger strike on Alaa's behalf – were “putting their lives at risk to secure his fundamental right to freedom and human dignity.”

Two years ago, Alaa's sister, Sanaa Seif, accepted our One Humanity Award on Alaa's behalf. In a moving account published in the Guardian, she remembers visiting him in November 2022 after he was forced to end a 200-day partial hunger strike – one that nearly secured his release – shortly before his forty-first birthday.

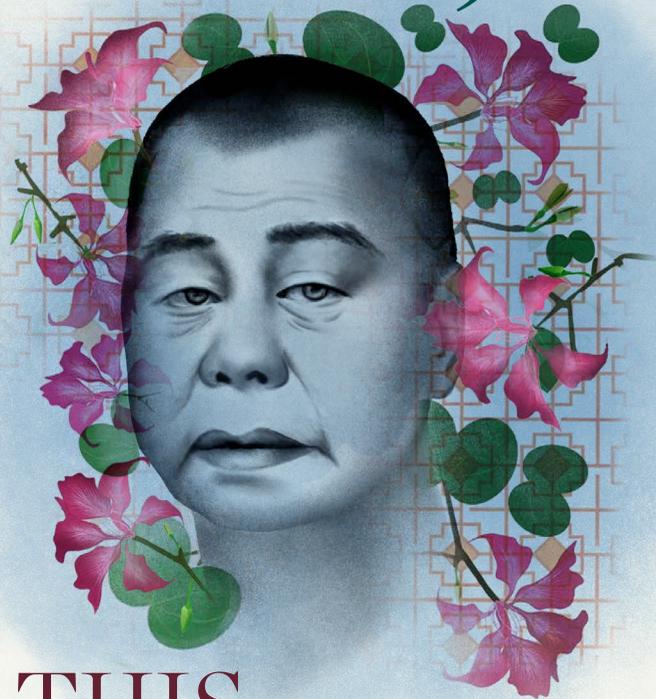
“He described a near-death experience: after days of no water and months of no food, he'd been incredibly unwell. He'd collapsed in the bathroom. Waking up on the floor, he was put on drips. Then, out of nowhere, he was hearing music – for the first time in three years. Pink Floyd's *Comfortably Numb*. An officer had played the song in the hope of bringing him round. He talked to us about our family. His son. Our pregnant sister. He was very emotional. At the end, we were briefly allowed to hug – our first embrace in three years. I felt how frail he was. As I held him, something softened in my mind. Pushed to the brink, I'd become so focused on my strategy to get him out that I'd forgotten Alaa's humanity. In that moment, all I could feel was gratitude that he was alive.”

OUR CENTRE
HAS MORE
THAN DOUBLED
RELIEF
PAYMENTS TO
ENDANGERED
WRITERS
THROUGH
ITS OWN
EMERGENCY
FUND.

Sanaa's gratitude is worth remembering. A necessary reminder that the writers we honour elsewhere in this report are not simply iconic dissidents. They are someone's beloved sibling, parent, spouse or child. Our advocacy for Jimmy Lai, Narges Mohammadi, and Alaa should never lose sight of the dreadful toll their incarceration and persecution has exacted on their families.

At an annual retreat in February 2025, PEN Canada's board agreed to a substantial increase in emergency grants for imperilled writers. Since then, we have made a substantial initial contribution to the PEN Emergency Fund (PEF) which helps dozens of writers every year. Set up in 1971 in the Netherlands by the anti-fascist writer and journalist A. den Doolaard, the PEF collaborates closely with PEN International to fast-track the processing of emergency applications and issue cash grants, sometimes within a single day. Additionally, our centre has more than doubled relief payments to endangered writers through its own emergency fund and via collaboration with a sister centre which helped disburse payments to five Iranian writers. We intend to make further increases for this vital work in the year ahead.

DEAR JIMMY,



I HOPE THIS
LETTER FINDS
YOU IN GOOD
HEALTH.

Jimmy Lai is a pro-democracy campaigner, writer, and founder of the now-shuttered Apple Daily newspaper. In December 2024, after being held in solitary confinement for four years, his trial resumed in Hong Kong. If convicted, he faces a potential life sentence.

Although both of our families are from Guangdong province, you and I could not be more different. You have the entrepreneurial spirit my parents would have applauded though they themselves always struggled to make ends meet. You made a fortune in textiles and retail stores, then launched one of Hong Kong's most powerful media companies. I, on the other hand, read a great deal of history, teach literature, and write fiction; I break into a cold sweat every time I enter a bank.

And yet we are joined because we hold freedom of expression as our right. You insist that peaceful protest is a necessity, that those who fight for justice should never act in vengeance, nor cede their moral authority. I, too, believe this: I believe the world we want starts at this moment, that we create it with every act, every decision.

I grieve that the Chinese government is making you a symbol of their power — of the brutality awaiting those who dare to exercise freedoms which once belonged to all Hong Kongers under the Basic Law.

This situation is all the more devastating because our world is shattering. We live in a moment when violations against the free press are everywhere in horrific abundance; when trust in traditional media has collapsed; when, in the midst of a climate emergency, climate activists are pursued with the full force of the law; when dissent is criminalised; when governments in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere have demonstrated, in word and deed, that they will minimize horror and turn a blind eye to the killing of journalists — indeed, to the barring of the world's press from Gaza, where 70 percent of verified victims are women and children, where famine is imminent or already present, where Israeli media reports that ethnic cleansing of Palestinians is taking place — all the while asserting that they uphold international law and human rights.

We are all caught in a net, knowing that those who supply weapons, extract resources, and make money from permanent war continue to instrumentalize political movements for their own interests. Yet, despite this broken world, your courage remains.

In interviews, you mention the solace you have found in your faith. Here, again, we differ; but I am reminded of my father who, until the end of his life, carried a card which requested that, should a stranger find him, they should summon a priest to cleanse his spirit and prepare him to meet his beloved, his father, his protector. Religious faith gave my father strength to face the heartaches of his life in the aftermath of war and brutality. It was a source of the love which he nourished — even in the most difficult times.

I recognise this quality in you, magnified, and I want to tell you that your courage is a light. It shows us a dignity which is sacred and belongs to all. May you receive the justice you have fought so hard to safeguard for others: may you be free.

In solidarity and with love,



Madeleine Thien
is the author of
four books, most
recently *The
Book of Records*.
She lives in
Montreal.

CANADIAN AND LEGAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT

Lori Sterling, Chair

The Committee has focused on the following this past quarter:

PEN has published a series of statements about writers at risk. In particular, it sent letters protesting (1) the use of law enforcement to criminalize political speech in the case of Montreal-based activist and author, Yves Engler, who was arrested and charged with harassment and indecent communication for his responses to the social media posts of pro-Israel influencer Dahlia Kurtz; and (2) the cancellation of Rachel Gilmore's segment on CTV on fact checking during the election campaign due to political pressure.

Mia Jain, a student at the U of T Faculty of Law, will be our summer intern. She will be researching limits on free expression in China and will report to both Lori and Brendan.

PEN Canada also issued a statement with PEN America and PEN Québec on the importance of a free flow of expression across borders, and calling for an exemption from tariffs (see "PEN Canada, PEN America, and PEN Québec joined today in a united call for books and literature to flow freely across our shared border," April 1, 2025).

The CLA Committee will participate in the broader PEN Canada campaign for free expression in the face of rising authoritarianism, to begin later this year including assisting with the campaign narrative and signature events.

Due to prorogation of Parliament early in 2025, there was no government work done on specific legislative bills, including Bill C-63, the Online Harms Bill, with which PEN Canada has been critically engaged. The Bill did not figure prominently in the election campaign. Should the Bill be part of the upcoming legislative agenda, PEN will continue commenting on internet regulation to protect minors and to stop the online harassment of writers in exile in Canada.

Last but certainly not least, the Committee has welcomed new members, namely, existing board member, Bruce Walsh, and new board member, Ira Wells. We look forward to working with them.

Words and ideas are not owned by nations and states; the closing of borders is a harbinger for the closing of minds. In this context, ideas and information must be allowed to travel freely, a potential antidote to ignorance and chauvinism. Our writers must not be silenced, either — whether through direct censorship, intimidation, the chilling effect of political tensions, or the creation of economic barriers.”

Extract from joint statement by PEN America, PEN Canada and PEN Québec, April 1, 2025

NEW HONORARY MEMBER

MARÍA CRISTINA GARRIDO RODRÍGUEZ



Cuban poet and activist María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez is currently imprisoned on a seven-year prison sentence imposed after she was convicted in 2022 of “public disorder,” “contempt,” and “resistance,” for participating in peaceful protests. With this annual report, PEN Canada announces her as its newest Honorary Member.

In November 2023, Garrido sent an audio message from jail to the PEN community talking about censorship in Cuba and the power of art:

Translated from Spanish

I send a warm greeting to all my friends in the free world and to the guild of poets and artists in general.

I am recording this brief audio message from a political prison so that I can, in some way, be present with you to commemorate the Day of the Imprisoned Writer – a day to remember those who hold the responsive, beautiful word as a luminary and a banner in the confines of a cell.

Unfortunately, even after so much history, after identifying the methods of domination, many of us remain stagnant in ignorance and selfishness, incapable of humane conduct and reasoning. They become dehumanized dictators, full of hatred and obsession for those of us who use the free wings of art and poetry to express, in our own words, what we need.

In my country, Cuban socialism has declared itself the enemy of individual freedoms and it suppresses the talents of creators when it subjects them to the restrictive rules of communism. Much of Cuban art on the island is imprisoned behind the bars of ideological censorship. The lack of free will is a threat to the productivity of the individual, and prevents its sustainable and healthy development.

But art will always be an unstoppable harvest; a bounty that feeds those who thirst for love, for romanticism – those who seek fulfillment in words and feelings, and not through criticism. The yielding flesh can be imprisoned but not the spirit; the tense hands, but not the inspiration.

To all the imprisoned writers of the world, I hope that all my admiration and exhortation will enable you to continue creating, in the amalgam of words and silences, your own world of letters and refuges.

I take this opportunity to call for freedom in Cuba and for all the political prisoners that the Castro-Canal regime keeps in jail, unjustly.

H

HONORARY
MEMBERS

CUBA

MARÍA CRISTINA GARRIDO RODRÍGUEZ

ERITREA

SAID ABDELKADER

EMANUEL ASRAT

TEMESKEN GHEBREYESUS

MATTEWOS HABTEAB

DAWIT HABTEMICHAEL

MEDHANIE HAILE

DAWIT ISAAK

YUSUF MOHAMED ALI

SEYOUM TSEHAYE

FESSHAYE YOHANNES

EGYPT

ALAA ABD EL-FATTAH

HONG KONG

JIMMY LAI

IRAN

NARGES MOHAMMADI

M

Every year, PEN Canada adds a threatened writer or journalist whose case has been monitored by PEN International to its roster of Honorary Members.

We lobby governments, organize petitions and send letters to campaign for the release of these writers, or call for investigations in the cases of torture, forced disappearances and killings. The Honorary Member program aims to sustain hope and provide personal support to these writers – and to achieve their unconditional release.

Over its lifetime, PEN Canada has adopted over 100 Honorary Members. In 2024, Jimmy Lai became an Honorary Member, and with this annual report, María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez is announced as our newest Honorary Member.

CUBA

Cuban poet and activist **María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez** is serving a seven-year prison sentence imposed after being convicted in March 2022 of “public disorder,” “contempt,” and “resistance.” She was arrested with her sister Angélica Garrido in July 2021 after participating in peaceful protests.

Garrido is held in poor conditions in detention, including solitary confinement, lack of food and water, and inadequate sanitation. She has also been beaten. Together with her sister Angélica, she went on hunger strike for five days in September 2022 in protest at their continued detention.

Her sister, released in July 2024, stated that the authorities promised Garrido a transfer to a camp with exit permits that would enable her to see her children, but this concession was eventually denied. María Cristina is the only female inmate from the 11-J movement still imprisoned; the rest have been moved to a camp or paroled.

Garrido was born in Quivicán, Mayaquebé in 1982. She is the author of *Examen de tiempo* (*Time Examination*), published in 2022. Her most recent book *Voz cautiva: poemas escritos desde la cárcel* (*Captive Voice: poems written from prison*), published in 2023, recounts some of the challenges faced during her incarceration, including ill-treatment, isolation, surveillance, and depression.

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: **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas*), **Yusuf Mohamed Ali** (editor-in-chief of *Tsigenay*), **Emanuel Asrat** (editor of *Zemen*), **Temesken Ghebreyesus** (reporter for *Keste Debena*), **Mattewos Habteab** (editor-in-chief of *Meqaleh*), **Dawit Habtemichael** (reporter for *Meqaleh*), **Medhanie Haile** (editor-in-chief of *Keste Debena*), **Dawit Isaak** (writer and co-owner of *Setit*), **Seyoum Tsehaye** (TV and radio journalist; weekly columnist for *Setit*), and **Fesshaye "Joshua" Yohannes** (playwright, poet; publisher of *Setit*).

In 2007, reports indicated that Ali, Abdelkader, Haile and Yohannes died in custody due to harsh conditions, 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 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 2024, Dawit Isaak, who holds dual Eritrean-Swedish citizenship, was given the Edelstam Prize *in absentia*. His daughter, Betlehem Isaak, continues to campaign for his freedom.

EGYPT

Alaa Abd El-Fattah is an Egyptian software developer, writer, blogger and pro-democracy activist who gained international prominence during the 2011 revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak.

Alaa has been arrested and detained multiple times. Most recently, in 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 was sentenced, in absentia, to 15 years in jail for violating Egypt's Protest Law. In December 2021, Alaa was sentenced to an additional five years in prison on charges of "broadcasting false news" related to a social media post.

While in prison, a collection of Alaa's work, *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2021), was published by Fitzcarraldo Editions.

In 2022, following a successful appeal by his family to the British government to grant him UK citizenship, Alaa began to ask the Egyptian government to speak to British officials. He was then transferred to Wadi El-Natrun Prison, where he was tortured and beaten by prison officials.

On September 29, 2024, Alaa completed his five-year sentence, but Egyptian authorities continue to detain him arbitrarily by refusing to recognize the more than two years he had spent in pretrial detention, thereby pushing his release date to January 2027. That day, his mother – academic and human rights activist, Dr. Laila Soueif – started an open-ended hunger strike to protest his imprisonment. She has since lost 40 percent of her body weight and has been hospitalized at least twice.

In March 2025, Alaa joined his mother in her hunger strike, causing him bouts of vomiting and abdominal pain. PEN is fearful for his and his mother's lives.

Alaa received PEN Canada's One Humanity Award in 2023, when his sister, Sanaa Seif, flew to Canada and accepted the award on his behalf. Alaa was named the 2024 Writer of Courage by PEN Pinter Prize 2024 winner Arundhati Roy.

HONG KONG

A writer, publisher and activist with UK citizenship, **Jimmy Lai** has been held in solitary confinement since December 2020 following his initial brief detention in August 2020 on multiple charges for his journalism and pro-democracy activism.

Since his arrest, Lai has served sentences relating to four convictions of unauthorized assembly; these expired in September 2022. In December 2022, Lai was sentenced to a further five years and nine months' imprisonment.

On December 18, 2023, a new trial commenced on two charges under the National Security Law (NSL) of "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces," with the prosecution claiming that these "crimes" were committed through writings published by Apple Daily and in posts on his Twitter account. In addition to the NSL charges, Lai faces a separate count of 'conspiracy to produce seditious publications' under Hong Kong's colonial-era sedition law, with the prosecution citing 161 editions of Apple Daily as "examples of seditious publications[...] with a view to polluting the minds of the impressionable ones." Lai has pleaded not guilty to all charges.

In September 2024, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found Lai's ongoing detention to be arbitrary and called for his immediate release. On November 20, 2024, Lai testified and by the end of the year, the trial was ongoing. If convicted, he faces a potential life sentence. His son, Sebastien Lai, continues to campaign for his freedom.

In October 2024, Jimmy Lai received the PEN Canada One Humanity Award in absentia.

RELEASED DECEMBER 2024

NARGES MOHAMMADI

IRAN

Narges Mohammadi is a prominent journalist, human rights defender, and Nobel Laureate who has been repeatedly targeted by the Iranian authorities since 2009. Over the last two decades, she has faced repeated legal harassment for her work, including several criminal convictions and travel bans.

Her most recent conviction, in 2015, sentenced her 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.

In June 2024, Narges received an additional year on top of her current 16-year sentence. In December 2024, she was temporarily released from Evin Prison on medical grounds, but there are concerns that she will be reimprisoned to continue serving her sentence.

She is the mother of two children and the wife of prominent journalist and activist Taghi Rahmani, who himself has spent a total of 17 years in prison. In 2023, Mohammadi published *White Torture*, a two-volume book that details the mistreatment of prisoners in Iran.

EVENTS COMMITTEE REPORT

Anouchka Freybe, Chair

Throughout the year, PEN Canada organizes a diverse array of literary events that raise money and awareness for freedom of expression. If you have a suggestion for an event, or if you would like to host or volunteer, please contact PEN's Director of Operations, Theresa Johnson.

PEN Canada's events committee's guiding principle is to engage and inform. The past year of programming maintained momentum through community partnership, and we continue to lean into every opportunity to uplift the work of talented writers, researchers, poets and authors. PEN Canada's mission—to defend freedom of expression as a basic human right—is made more relevant through collaboration between individuals and organizations who parse current human rights issues with creative skill and content depth.

The 2024-25 schedule expanded upon our campaign pillars — Intellectual Freedom (Book Banning), Digital Transnational Repression, and Disinformation and Online Harms. Our programs serve a literary or informational purpose (although at times both), and are presented in multiple formats: in-person, hybrid, or online. PEN Canada would like to acknowledge the support of and collaboration with the following organizations: the Centre for Free Expression at Toronto Metropolitan University (CFE), the Toronto International Festival of Authors (TIFA), CBC Ideas, University of Toronto, the Forum for Caribbean Writers and Readers, Another Story Bookshop, and HotDocs, for an incredible year of program development.

WE ARE STRENGTHENED BY
OUR PARTNERSHIPS, AND THE
EVENTS THAT GALVANIZE
DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
AROUND OUR COMMON
GOALS AND VALUES.

Here are a few highlights to give a sense of the breadth of our exciting and important programming:

- The Graeme Gibson Talk continues to be a highlight of our fall literary events calendar, developed in conjunction with TIFA and CBC Ideas. In its fourth year, this year's subjects, climate change and environmental losses, were investigated by non-fiction author John Vaillant and climate-change expert Catherine Abreu, and moderated by Nahlah Ayed.
- The Writers in Exile program continues to be an active hub in Toronto, profiling the work of its members and the impact of their stories through a series of readings, and in the process has galvanized a growing support network.
- A newly formatted **PEN Canada Awards** ceremony was held in October, with Charlie Foran as the master of ceremonies. The evening celebrated the winners of PEN's four annual awards and drew attention to imperiled writers across the world.
- PEN Canada co-sponsored 11 of the CFE's Virtual Forums and In Conversation Series in 2024-25. The events continue to be free of charge, and create regular engagement around difficult conversations.

We are strengthened by our partnerships, and the events that galvanize different perspectives around our common goals and values. In the coming year, PEN Canada would like to deepen its presence across the country with regional literary and informational events that resonate with local communities. We are also acutely aware of the many outstanding opportunities to connect with Canadians across the country through engagement at the local level.

PUBLIC
EVENTS
REPORT
AND
PRIZES
2024/25

LITERARY EVENTS

Geographies of the Imagination

Wednesday April 10, 2024

A poetry night with Christine Wu (2023 New Voices Award winner), Britta Badour, and Darby Minott Bradford. Held at Another Story Bookshop in Toronto, and presented in partnership with the Atwater Poetry Project.

Poetic Voices, In Bud and In Bloom

Thursday, April 11, 2024

Poetry readings by Christine Wu, Darby Minott Bradford, and Emily Tristan Jones. Held at the Atwater Library in Montreal, and presented in partnership with the Atwater Poetry Project and Atwater Writers Exhibition.

MacLennan Lecture | Book challenges and their impact on Canadian communities

Thursday April 25, 2024

A roundtable on book challenges in the Canadian context and the power of community action. Presented by the Friends of the McGill Library, the panelists included Michelle Arbuckle (Ontario Library Association), Brendan de Caires (PEN Canada), and Robin Stevenson (author), with moderator Joseph Hafner.

Graeme Gibson Talk | Burning Questions: Confronting the Challenges of our Global Climate Crisis

Saturday September 21, 2024

Bestselling non-fiction writer John Vaillant spoke with Catherine Abreu, one of Canada's most influential thinkers on global climate policy, on the burning questions and challenges facing our fast-warming world.

A marquee event at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, Margaret Atwood introduced the event and the conversation was moderated by Nahlah Ayed. Their conversation is available as a podcast from CBC Radio's IDEAS.

PEN Canada Awards Night

October 16, 2024

Held at 401 Richmond St West, this ceremony celebrated PEN's four annual awards and drew attention to imperilled writers across the world.

Four award winners took to the stage to accept their awards, while the fifth received theirs remotely, via a speech from his son, Sebastien Lai. Jimmy Lai, a publisher and pro-democracy activist, remains detained in Hong Kong as his trial continues. An empty chair was placed on stage to honour him.

Each award was followed by a dramatic monologue reading, performed by Banafsheh Taherian, reflecting on the Women, Life, Freedom movement in Iran. Charlie Foran was the master of ceremonies.

An Evening with Author Zalika

Reid-Benta

Thursday, February 27, 2025

Zalika Reid-Benta discussed her debut novel *River Mumma* and award-winning short story collection *Frying Plantain*. Held at New College in Toronto, this was a collaboration between New College, Victoria College, the Centre of Caribbean Studies, Women and Gender Studies Institute, and PEN Canada.

An Evening with Marie-Célie Agnant

Thursday, March 20, 2025

Poet, novelist and former teacher Marie-Célie Agnant discussed her life's work, offering readings in French and English. Held at D.G. Ivey Library in Toronto, this was a collaboration between the Forum for Caribbean Writers and PEN Canada.

WRITERS IN EXILE EVENTS

Voices of Freedom

The Voices of Freedom reading series is a quarterly event, filling every seat in the Hirut Cafe in Toronto. These events are organized by – and feature members of – the PEN Canada Writers in Exile community.

November 24, 2024: Shams Erfan (Afghanistan), Lidiia Karpenko (Ukraine), and Dilan Qadir (Iraq-Kurdistan).

March 30, 2025: Tala Motazedi (Iran), Andersson Boscán (Ecuador), and Raffi Minas (Syria).

Author appearances for *The Uncaged Voice: Stories by Writers in Exile*

April 13-14, 2024: Arabic Canadian Book Fair, in Mississauga

June 18, 2024: Author Readings and Book Signing, in Newmarket

September 28-29, 2024: Word on the Street, in Toronto

Workshops

January 11, 2025: writing workshop with Patrick Crean

CRITICAL CONVERSATION ON FREE EXPRESSION

The following events were In Conversation panels, an online series presented by the Centre for Free Expression (CFE) which is co-sponsored by PEN Canada.

AI Goes to War

Wednesday, May 22, 2024

Artificial Intelligence use in warfare is of interest to military technophiles, encouraged by corporate interests that stand to benefit. After Israel used AI to target Gaza, Lucy Suchman and Brenda McPhail discuss what's at stake.

Freedom of Expression, Protests and Encampments

Tuesday, September 17, 2024

Jamie Cameron, Sarah Hamill, Louis-Philippe Lampron, and Finn Makela discuss what we can learn from what happened on Canadian and Quebec campuses in the midst of the war on Gaza.

The Life and Death of Freedom of Expression

Tuesday, September 24, 2024

Richard Moon and David Sneiderman discuss how social media adds to the ways speech can be harmful while undermining traditional legal protections.

What To Do About Foreign Interference

Tuesday October 1, 2024

Nick Robinson in conversation with Tim McSorley, on Canada's Bill C-70 (Countering Foreign Interference Act) and its plans for a foreign influence registry, new powers for CSIS, and significant changes to the Criminal Code and Security of Information Act.

Is investigative journalism in Canada dying?

Thursday November 21, 2024

Investigative reporters Rob Cribb, Allya Davidson, Marie-Maude Denis, Anton Kuschany, Cecil Rosner, and Julian Sher discuss what's at stake as local Canadian newspapers are shut down and investigative units are eliminated.

Global Surge in Attacks on University Faculty & Students

Tuesday, November 26, 2024

A new report finds scholars and students around the world face frequent, pervasive attacks on their academic freedom. Amy Kapit, Shuchi Karim, Rob Quinn, Norah Vollmer, and Charles Reeve, all from Scholars at Risk, discuss.

Can editorial standards be applied fairly in highly polarized situations?

Tuesday, January 14, 2025

Bitter divisions over the war on Gaza provoked a flood of allegations that the media had abandoned editorial standards in their coverage. Samira Mohyeddin, Shree Paradkar, Ivor Shapiro, and Sakeina SyedKey address bias, editorial responsibility, and the balance between fairness and advocacy.

What should be the limits to freedom of expression in Canadian universities?

Tuesday January 28, 2025

Jamie Cameron, Louis-Philippe Lampron, Richard Moon, and Vershawn Young discuss the culture and limits of expressive freedom on campuses.

“We can’t teach a book with that word in it”

Wednesday February 5, 2025

Lawrence Hill in conversation with Debra Thompson, on the banning of his award-winning *The Book of Negroes* in classrooms by the London District Catholic School Board, due to its use of the N-word. A discussion on the role of literature in society.

Censoring Books in Schools and Libraries

Wednesday, February 26, 2025

Ira Wells and James L. Turk discuss Ira's new book, *On Book Banning*. The book explores the history of censorship and its consequences for human development, for art, and for democracy.

AWARDS

RBC PEN Canada New Voices Award

Winner: Nancy Huggett

Nancy Huggett is a writer and poet based in Ottawa. As part of the prize, Huggett received yearlong mentorship from Susan Olding, a writer, poet, and essayist based in Toronto.

Speaking of Huggett's winning poetry collection, *Revelation*, the jury says "a clear cohesion emerges in this epic work, in the interplay of illness and healing, making and breaking, and in the delicate engagement with the religious theme implied in the title. We were struck by the work's powerful emotional resonance and its brave exploration of a felt experience."

The jury also selected four finalists:

Georgio Russell (Saltborne), Hajera Khaja (The Rupture), Monica Nathan (Between Spaces), and Tessa Swackhammer (A Man Called Evergreen). They were chosen from 560 entries.

Past winners

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

Ken Filkow Prize

Winner: Shree Paradkar

Paradkar is a race and social justice columnist at *The Toronto Star*, where she also served as the first internal ombud in a newsroom in Canada, a position created to develop an anti-racist newsroom.

"Nominated for this award by her fellow journalists at the *Star* and elsewhere, Paradkar is regarded as a leader who shines a light on the marginalized and under-represented," the jury citation read. "Her active and committed support of young journalists of colour is fundamental to expanding free expression for those who are often excluded from the means to articulate marginalized experiences of an unequal society."

Paradkar has worked as a journalist in Toronto, Singapore, Bangalore, and Mumbai. Over the last 8 years, her *Star* column has tackled divisive, challenging topics, including police violence, anti-Black racism, the persistence of Islamophobia, the threat to LGBTQ+ rights, residential schools, anti-Indigenous racism, and the chill on Palestine advocacy.

The Ken Filkow Prize recognizes Paradkar for advancing freedom of expression in Canada. It is funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton, past PEN Canada president.

Past winners

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

Marie-Ange Garrigue Prize

Winner: Robina Aryubwal and Journalists for Human Rights

Robina Aryubwal, a women's rights activist, and Journalists for Human Rights (JHR) were jointly recognized for their significant help to journalists outside Canada.

When the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, JHR immediately launched an emergency evacuation effort. To meet the urgent need for a liaison between JHR and Afghan refugees, Rachel Pulfer brought on Robina Aryubwal. Over the next three years, working closely with domestic programs director Jordan MacInnis, Robina used her experience as a former refugee to assist Afghan refugees in their evacuation, resettlement and integration efforts. Through these efforts, JHR helped more than 500 at-risk Afghan journalists, human rights defenders, fixers, interpreters, educators and their families.

This prize is generously funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton, who also fund the Ken Filkow Prize.

Past winners

Joan Leishman
Mariam Al Zier

One Humanity Award

Recipient: Jimmy Lai

Jimmy Lai is a journalist, writer, media publisher, and pro-democracy activist. The 76-year-old was the owner of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper, once regarded as Hong Kong's most prolific pro-democracy news outlet.

Lai has spent over four years in solitary confinement awaiting his trial in Hong Kong, which remains ongoing. If convicted, he could face a life sentence for his journalism. His case is illustrative of the Chinese government's willingness to use the legal system to silence dissent, which Lai's international legal team and PEN International have raised at the United Nations on several occasions.

The One Humanity Award, established in 2006, is given to a writer whose work transcends the boundaries of national divides and inspires connections across cultures. Lai's son, Sebastien, accepted the award on his father's behalf virtually while he campaigned in Prague and London for his father's freedom.

Past recipients

Alaa Abd El-Fattah
Nasrin Sotoudeh
Ashraf Fayadh
Azimjon Askarov
Eskinder Nega
Raif Badawi
Dieu Cay
Nasrin Sotoudeh
Lydia Cacho
Jiang Weiping
Zarganar

SUPPORT FOR WRITERS IN EXILE

George Brown College PEN Writer-in-Residence Recipient: Tala Motazedi

Tala Motazedi is a queer playwright and screenwriter from Iran. During her residency, she visited classrooms across campus, sharing her life story with students and discussing the value of free expression.

Motazedi earned a degree in dramatic literature from the University of Tehran. As a screenwriter and playwright, she has collaborated across continents with theatre artists, had her plays performed internationally, and been recognized at international film festivals.

Despite the climate of censorship in Iran, she built a thriving international career in theatre and film. When Women, Life, Freedom protests broke out in 2022, Motazedi stood in solidarity with the movement, refusing to comply with hijab mandates. For this, she faced bans on her films and ability to work. Facing further political and personal persecution, she fled to Canada in 2023.

Her residency marks 20 years of the PEN Writer-in-Residence program at George Brown College, which has created opportunity for 18 members of our Writers in Exile community.

Humber Polytechnic-PEN Canada Writers-in-Exile scholarship Recipient: Tala Motazedi

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.

During her scholarship, Tala worked on her debut novel, *King Kong 1941*, which examines race, resilience, discrimination, and queer life during World War II. She was mentored by Canadian novelist Antanas Šileika.

"This project draws from my personal experiences in Iran, where fear forced me to hide my true self for many years," she says, speaking of her identity as a queer woman, something she feels free and proud to be in Canada. "Now, in this newfound freedom, I am exploring the suppressed aspects of my identity and reflecting on how life under an oppressive government caused me to lose sight of who I truly was."

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2024/25

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ORGANIZATIONS WHO WERE
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Globe and Mail
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New College, University of Toronto
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**2024 PEN Writer in Residence
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Tala Motazedi
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