PEN

PEN CANADA
ANNUAL REPORT 2025/26

A PLACE AT THE TABLE

100 YEARS OF PEN IN CANADA

Founded in 1983, PEN Canada is a nonpartisan organization of writers and readers. We fight censorship, help free persecuted writers from prison, assist exiled writers who live in Canada, and promote literature.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Sarmishta Subramanian

A place at the table: 100 years of PEN in Canada

1926 2026

This spring, I found myself among a small group of artists, activists, and writers from Berlin, Philadelphia, Barcelona, and elsewhere, at a virtual art happening featuring Riwaa, a young Palestinian writer, and her collaborator, an Israeli artist and clown who calls herself "Officer Az-Oolay." Riwaa has lived in a refugee camp in Khan Younis since her home in Rafah was bombed, and Az-Oolay lives in Jerusalem. The two are just an hour apart and correspond daily but have never met. On Zoom they would present their text-and-sound work, "Sending Voice," exhibited in Jerusalem a few months earlier.

But first—tea. Az-Oolay, in clown makeup and uniform bedecked with gaudy flowers, extended a cup through her camera. Riwaa, in hijab, separated from the night by the fabric of a tent, "received" it and drank. Then they passed a Kabukim, a candied-peanut snack. Through a sweet sleight-of-hand gag, they had seated themselves around a common table. The act of gathering could not undo the humanitarian crisis of the war in Gaza or the more than 72,000 Palestinian deaths, including those of writers who had voiced the experiences of their community. But it allowed an intimate exchange between two individuals, and what Riwaa described as the lifeline of artistic collaboration. "The enemy is known," she told her audience, as well as Az-Oolay, who plies her craft at protests for Palestinian rights. "You are not the enemy."

The problem of mass society, Hannah Arendt wrote, is not the number of people but that "the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them." Arendt invoked the analogy of a séance, where the people around a table "might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other were no longer separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible." The table keeps us together, distinct yet attached.

A table was where PEN Canada's English-language story began four decades ago. It was a distinguished table—Margaret Atwood's. The PEN Chapter in Québec, founded in 1926, had just split into francophone and anglophone centres to better serve both writing communities. Atwood and Graeme Gibson began hosting dinners for visiting writers and PEN International officials, hoping to learn from them what our own fledgling group could be. Those lively meetings evolved into a robust national organization that has advocated for imprisoned writers abroad, resettled writers in exile, and given voice to pressing questions of free speech here at home.

Through the decades, PEN Canada has held the space for freedoms of imagination, expression, and thought.

We reflect on that mission in this report, which highlights moments from PEN's vibrant century in Canada, including the combustible case of Eli Langer, the artist whose work was brought to trial under new child pornography laws in the 1990s, and Jiang Weiping's harsh imprisonment and exit from China. Long before global media turned their attention to crackdowns on diaspora dissent, the Chinese journalist resettled in Canada with PEN's aid, only to find himself still in his former government's sightlines.

Through the decades, PEN Canada has held the space for freedoms of imagination, expression, and thought. Sometimes this is less gentle work than it sounds. It is part of the mission of claiming space for all voices: writers who cannot write because they are imprisoned or in peril; writers who must, even if they say unpopular things their public does not want to read; writers whose books vanish from library shelves; and writers who, but for PEN's insistent spotlight, might themselves vanish from memory—like the Eritrean-Swedish dissident Dawit Isaak, imprisoned in Eritrea since 2001, for whom PEN continues to advocate.

We speak about the necessity of a space at the table because consequential decisions happen here. So does connection, though a table is not always a comfortable place. If everybody has a voice, some disharmony is to be expected, and welcomed. For a hundred years now, writers and their champions have gathered around PEN's table to encourage this noisy debate, to defend the written word and artistic imagination and freedom even if, or especially if, we disagree. Sara Ahmed described another function of a table. Yes, it is "a surface to write. A table: how we come to write, what we can read." It is also a place from which to change the story.

Through the decades, PEN Canada has held the space for freedoms of imagination, expression, and thought.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Ira Wells

WE ARE LIVING THROUGH THE MOST RADICAL DISRUPTION OF LITERARY CULTURE SINCE THE RISE OF THE PRINTING PRESS.

Canada at a Crossroads

As a teenager in the 1990s, I used to carry around a battered copy of Leonard Cohen's *Beautiful Losers*, a novel I didn't understand. Maybe I thought it would impress girls. Maybe I wanted to traffic in that strange aura I could feel emanating from Cohen: the way he used words to create beauty, to send chills down your spine, to seduce. There were no real writers in Lethbridge, Alberta, none that I knew, but I knew they existed in other parts of Canada. Their books would show up under the tree at Christmas: *Alias Grace*. *The English Patient*. *The Life of Pi*. Our country had its own literature, and nobody thought much about it; it was part of the cultural furniture. I was a hick kid from hockeytown. Leonard Cohen was a Buddhist-Jewish sage from Montréal. Canada was what we had in common, and literature was what brought us together.

That time is fading fast. As PEN Canada Advisory Council chair Richard Stursberg documents in his new book, *Lament for a Literature*, "Canadians now control only a tiny fraction of their domestic book market. It is the weakest domestically-owned publishing sector in the industrialized world." Over the last few decades, the share of Canadian-published books has plummeted from more than 20 percent of those sold in Canada to less than 5 percent. Our prime ministers publish their books with New York publishers. Those publishers are hardly committed to telling Canadian stories: peruse the latest offerings of some of Canada's top literary writers and you'll notice that distinctly Canadian markers have been excised. "CanLit" largely takes place in a kind of uncanny valley—Canada, but not quite.

Meanwhile, our ability to read books—any book—seems to be deteriorating, especially among young people. Surveys show that high school age students engage in pleasure reading for an average of nine minutes per day—compared with an average of 4.5 hours each day spent scrolling their phones. Teachers increasingly assign summaries or excerpts rather than novels; professors complain that students arrive at university without having read a single book in high school. In *Survival*, Margaret Atwood argued that a Canadian literature was a way of situating ourselves in the world, a way of answering "where is here?" The imaginative lives of young Canadians now unfold mostly within a global anti-culture, utterly unmoored from any organic sense of community, tradition, or roots. "I'm neither left or right / I'm just stayin' home tonight / Getting lost in that hopeless little screen," Cohen sang, without knowing how small, or how hopeless, the screens would get.

Insofar as books matter, they are increasingly treated as political weapons. The practice of book banning, skyrocketing in the United States over the last few years, has now arrived in our country. Dozens of books have been pulled from school shelves in Alberta, to satisfy a provincial ministerial order that was probably crafted to curry favour with conservative special-interest groups. Meanwhile, Ontario school boards have quietly liquidated thousands of books for being too Eurocentric and heteronormative; literary "classics" are seen as especially dangerous. Canadians are embracing censorship as a solution to our social and political problems, invoking "harm" to children as a way of scoring political points. These efforts will fail in the end, but have already succeeded in destroying libraries and keeping books out of the hands of people who may have profited from them.

All of this is unfolding against the rise of Artificial Intelligence. Nobody knows how AI will impact our society—whether it may lead to slightly increased productivity, a new utopia of human flourishing, crushing unemployment, or the total extinction of humanity. (Geoffrey Hinton has estimated a 10 to 20 percent chance of the latter within the next three decades.)

More certain is the fact that we are living through the most radical disruption of literary culture since the rise of the printing press. The loss of a shared literary culture, the resurgence of censorship, and the devaluation of reading are all existential issues for PEN, and they are all happening at once. PEN Canada's role is to ensure that our embattled values—intellectual and imaginative freedom, critical debate, the promotion of literature—do more than simply survive in cloistered corners of the culture, but illuminate a path for the legions of young people yearning for genuine cultural connection. We must lead the way in making the case for reading, writing, thinking—and creating spaces where our ideals can grow.

I invite you to join us at our talks and events in the year ahead: nowhere do our values feel more alive, more electric, than in readings delivered by members of our Writers in Exile community, or in conversation with writers at our events. I ask you to spread the word about PEN Canada, to bring new writers and allies into the fold. And I thank you for staying engaged. I am immensely grateful that we can rally around PEN at this moment. Our mission has never been more urgent.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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.

1980s

Notes & Recollections

"We started to look for a president. ...We considered Margaret Laurence and Pierre Berton. Margaret Laurence was too active and too busy… and with much regret and kindness turned us down. Pierre Berton had the opposite problem—he wanted to be left alone. He had been ill; he wanted to write a book and had no spare time…

Then we thought Margaret Atwood would be a good choice. And she, in the end, agreed to serve as president. She made it a condition of her acceptance that, as far as writers-in-prison went, we make a point of aiding not just victims of communist regimes but victims of any kind of tyranny, whether it was right- or left-wing tyranny."

Novelist and former PEN (Montreal) head **Constance Beresford-Howe** on how the country's brightest literary star became the first president of PEN Canada

Reproduced from An Oral History of the Canadian Centre of PEN International in Montreal, Canada, compiled by David Weiss, published by the Lawrence Lande Foundation for Canadian Historical Research, McGill University (1986)

"We agreed we needed someone with a big name and someone who would be active, not just a figurehead."

1983
Canadian PEN splits into anglophone and francophone groups, with the aid of former PEN (Montreal) president Constance Beresford-Howe. Margaret Atwood and Eugene Benson are co-presidents.

1985
PEN Canada begins writing letters to imprisoned writers.

1987
A fundraiser with bite: Publication of *The Canlit Foodbook:* From *Pen to Palate*, with recipes compiled and illustrated by Margaret Atwood.

1989
Martha Kuwee Kumsa, imprisoned without charges in Ethiopia for 10 years and the focus of a PEN Canada campaign, is freed. She soon resettles in Canada.

1989
International PEN congress held in Toronto and Montreal. One lucky train conveys a horde of literati to La Métropole. Half the delegates are women; writers from developing countries are invited — a first. Still, a Toronto group protests the whiteness of the panelists.

1989
PEN expands membership criteria. To join, writers now need one book "of substantial literary value," not two. Later, screenwriters qualify, and the definition of "writer" expands further still.

1983

Graeme Gibson co-founded PEN Canada, along with Eugene Benson and myself, and he led it for several crucial years. He was the only Canadian leader to speak publicly during the first phase of the fatwah against Salman Rushdie. That was stressful. Graeme knew how challenging it was for writers to deal with censors and book-banners — we seem to have an outbreak of those right now, even in places like Alberta — and, in some countries, to stay out of prison and keep your head on your shoulders if you write things that offend tyrants.

When PEN Canada began, we had no money, no staff, and no tools except for postage stamps and telephones. Through Graeme's skill in persuasion — he should have been selling fake gold bricks — we built a country-wide network of English-speaking Poets and Publishers, Playwrights, Editors and Essayists, and Novelists, which is what PEN stands for. The name should also now include Journalists and Bloggers and Tweeters — the rate at which they get murdered and imprisoned is high at the moment — but that would give us PEN-JBT, which would be hard to pronounce. But PEN Canada works on their behalf, too.

Here is one example of Graeme's persuasive powers. In early days, Graeme was attempting to raise money for PEN from a well-known tycoon. "I'm not giving money to that thing," the tycoon fumed. "It's full of Communists!" "Yes," Graeme agreed, "we do have some Communists. But we have some Fascists, too." He got the money.

by Margaret Atwood, co-founder and first president of PEN Canada.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Brendan de Caires

AFTER SUCH KNOWLEDGE, WHAT FORGIVENESS? WELL, NONE AT ALL, AT LEAST FROM ME. AND YET, DESPITE FEARFUL ODDS, WE STILL HAVE WRITERS AND JOURNALISTS WHO CHRONICLE THESE LAPSES, AND HELP US RESIST FURTHER MORAL DECAY.

In 1920, bemused by the cunning of History, T.S. Eliot's *Gerontion* asks: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" That dark question – its sly syntax precluding hope – had the Great War in mind, an unprecedented bloodletting that had recently snatched some 20 million lives away. Motivated by similar concerns, the first PEN centre was founded a year later, while Eliot drafted parts of *The Waste Land* as he recovered from a nervous breakdown at a private sanatorium. (*Gerontion* would have been its preface had Ezra Pound not argued otherwise.) Much of the sublime despair that surfaced in the iconic new poem – Eliot later called it 'rhythmical grumbling' – foreshadows our current polycrisis.

But not even Eliot, shoring fragments of culture against spiritual ruin, could foresee the American strongman we now endure, broadcasting his semi-literate effusions, bemerded with expletives and genocidal bluster, *from a phone*; nor imagine our *enshittified* information systems, misshaped into addiction platforms by amoral tech bros; nor grasp our ecocidal hyperconsumption, set to fill the seas, within 25 years, with more plastic than fish. Perhaps he might have guessed at Western liberalism's sanctimonious demise, *not with a bang but with a whimper*, as it stumbles from one self-induced disaster to the next.

Last year, at the PEN International Congress in Poland, a colleague from Sudan spoke about the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) massacring 1,000 civilians at the Zamzam displacement camp a few months earlier. No one paid much attention, she said, because black Africans are marginalia to the West's narrative of What Really Matters. She uttered this shaming truth within commuting distance of Auschwitz, and less than a day's travel from the frontlines of the war in Ukraine.

Earlier that week, the Congress had hosted a panel that examined the use of starvation as a weapon of war in Sudan, Bosnia, and Gaza. Listening to its participants' accounts, several of them first-hand, I felt the "species shame" that Martin Amis spoke of after watching the 9/11 attacks. I felt it again, too often, in the months ahead as Western apathy – fortified by years of abject silence in the face of at least two ongoing genocides – became its default posture towards other outrages.

After repressing local dissent in myriad ways, America has become a rogue nation. Extrajudicial killings, foreign incursions, and an unjustified pre-emptive war on Iran. Somehow, despite brave words at Davos, our new prime minister approved of this last adventure, at least before he could summon the mildest of dissents. In fairness, he was busy buttering up our new allies, those paragons of peace, order, and good government: Xi Jinping, Narendra Modi and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Well, none at all, at least from me. And yet, despite fearful odds, we still have writers and journalists who chronicle these lapses, and help us resist further moral decay. The courage of these few shines brighter than ever. The Egyptian blogger Alaa Abd el-Fattah was released by presidential pardon last September, after nearly 12 years of wrongful imprisonment and several life-threatening hunger strikes. Three of our other Honorary Members – Nobel Peace laureate Narges Mohammadi, Hong Kong publisher Jimmy Lai, and the Cuban poet María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez – remain in prison, but I still dare to hope that they, too, will walk free one day soon.

One moment of hope was our annual Graeme Gibson Talk in which Rachel Maddow and Rebecca Solnit discussed how best to resist America's creeping authoritarianism. Maddow wisely urged a detachment from Trump's histrionics, and a focus on everything he keeps trying to hide. Treat him and his minions like a simple machine, she argued, one that prefers "to go downhill, not uphill … if you can create enough discomfort ... where they're trying an incursion under your rights, they'll go somewhere else." Words to live by.

I also had the pleasure of congratulating Georgio Russell and Anna Sokolova – joint winners of the 2025 RBC/PEN Canada New Voices Award from a record-breaking 960 submissions. Nothing in my time at PEN has been more gratifying than our modest role in identifying and promoting CanLit's future talents. I was also delighted by the new energy, and audiences, evident at our Voices of Freedom readings at the Toronto Public Library and the University of Toronto. I look forward to more of both in the year ahead.

Throughout a busy year, our new president, Ira Wells, has led us with exemplary clarity, grace, and tact, for which I am very grateful. I also continue to be blessed with the energy, optimism, and good humour of my colleagues Theresa Johnson and Eilish Waller. Both have improved our centre's work in innumerable ways – I offer them my heartfelt gratitude.

1990s

Notes & Recollections

The last time I saw Peruvian writer and politician Yehude Simon Munaro was in February 1999, in a maximum security prison outside Lima. He had been arrested after President Alberto Fujimori's notorious "self-coup" in 1992, and charged with collaboration with terrorists and sentenced to 20 years. Four writers — a Norwegian, a Dane, a Catalan and this Canadian, members of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee — went to Peru to demand he be pardoned.

We spent 10 days meeting with politicians, journalists, lawyers, ambassadors, human rights activists, the head of Opus Dei, and, on our last morning, President Fujimori. For more than an hour, we discussed Yehude, then were co-opted into a photo op on the steps of the presidential palace. In 2000, Fujimori fled Peru in disgrace, and Yehude was released.

This spring I got a call from Carles Torner, the Catalan poet from that expedition. He was in Yehude's living room. That we were conversing again 27 years later made me think about how PEN has always defended imprisoned writers as individuals, as people. We name names. We are in it for the long game; we never give up until a case is resolved, either through freedom or death.

Marian Botsford Fraser was president of PEN Canada (1994-95) and chair of the Writers in Prison committee of PEN International (2009-2015).

"The idea behind PEN is simple, but strong: a writer in safety works on behalf of a writer at risk."

— Sandra Martin, president of PEN Canada (1999-2001)

1990
PEN intervenes in Oka crisis, asking PM Brian Mulroney and Québec Premier Robert Bourassa to lift restrictions on media so they can report on the conflict.

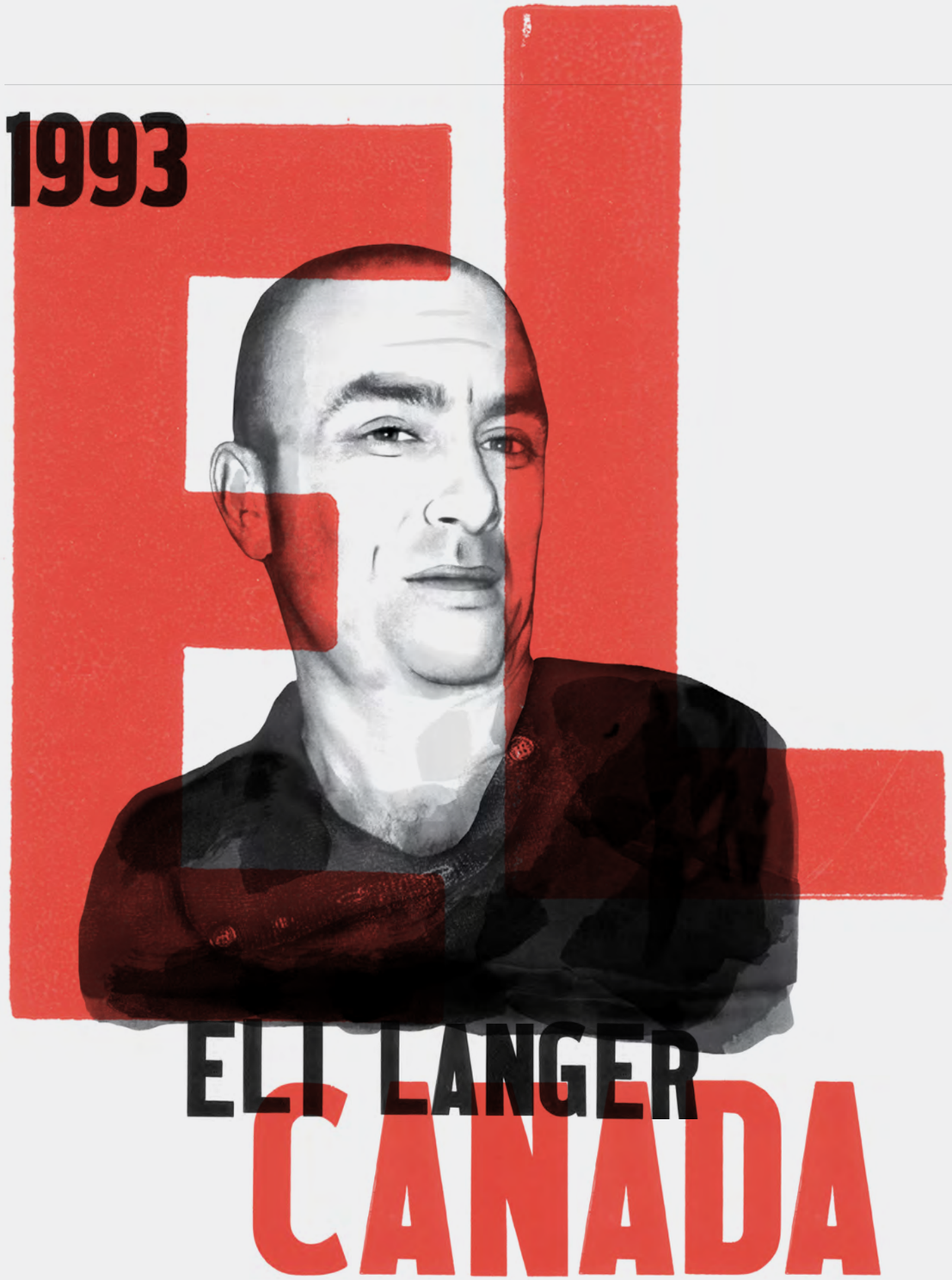
1991
PEN opposes the deportation of British-born Holocaust denier, David Irving, saying immigrants should receive the same level of democratic freedom of speech enjoyed by Canadian citizens.

1992
Salman Rushdie appears at a PEN Toronto event—a rare public sighting after the global fatwa declared by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 over his novel *The Satanic Verses*.

1993
PEN lobbies government against Canada Customs seizures of literature. Latest target: feminist vegetarian book titled *The Sexual Politics of Meat*. PEN will also intervene in the Little Sisters bookstore case.

1995
Imprisoned Nigerian writer and environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa is hanged with eight other Ogoni activists despite widespread international appeals, including PEN's.

1996
Board members meet with officials including Lloyd Axworthy, minister of foreign affairs, to request help for Writers in Prison: Plead our cases not just through postcard campaigns but in person to ambassadors, diplomats and consuls.



The synchronicity was so perfect you could be forgiven for believing it was planned this way. On August 1, 1993, section 163.1 to the Canadian Criminal Code came into effect — a parting gift from the outgoing Conservative government — making it a crime to own, make, exhibit, or sell any item depicting sexual activities involving persons under 18. Four months later, Toronto artist-run gallery Mercer Union mounted an exhibition of eight paintings and 50 drawings with renderings of adults and children undertaking sexual acts, such as masturbation, fellatio, and sodomy.

The works were by 26-year-old Eli Langer, who soon became a lightning rod for controversy around pornography, obscenity, and artistic freedom. On December 16, the Toronto Metropolitan Police's Morality Bureau seized most of the paintings and drawings. Langer and Mercer Union's director were arrested, though the charges were later dropped. It was ultimately the works themselves that were put on trial.

"[Langer's] images are largely informed by intuitive personal and social drives, exploring the phenomenon of intimacy where it exists without the compensation of social or cultural consent," Mercer Union's curatorial statement read. "Langer often boldly develops a sexual ambiguity that inadvertently addresses our cultural taboos and the formation of morality." Following his arrest, Langer said, "I did nothing more than accept my responsibility as an artist to provoke a dialogue."

Section 163.1 makes exemptions for "artistic merit," a slippery criterion that surrendered Langer's work to the sympathies of peers and appointed experts. Considering Langer's subject matter, it was not a given that the community would come to his defence — but come it did. Supportive testimonies were provided by venerated fellow artists such as Michael Snow and Ron Bloore, who appeared as a witness for the Crown — only to turn on prosecutors and provide an impassioned defense of Langer's work. He regarded the trial as an opportunity to seek vicarious justice for his spouse, gallerist Dorothy Cameron, who was convicted of exhibiting obscene drawings in 1965.

Meanwhile, PEN members unanimously adopted a resolution to support Langer, and PEN Canada, under the stewardship of John Ralston Saul, intervened on Langer's behalf in court. Langer's representation argued that because no children were involved in the production of the works, forged as they were from Langer's imagination, they should be absolved of any criminality. The judge, convinced of their artistic merit, ruled that the works posed no threat to minors. The pieces were returned, the gallery remounted the exhibition, and Langer went on to show his work internationally and to find employment as an instructor at UCLA.

There's a way in which the Langer case seems quaint in retrospect, the product of the same era of censorious culture wars in which the Parents Music Resource Center was affixing hip-hop and heavy metal CDs with warning labels (which served as a boon to sales). On the other hand, the intervening years have seen freedom of speech shift from its status as a predominantly left-wing issue to one taken up with special vehemence by the right, and the question of leniency with regards to acknowledging child sexuality has arguably never been more contentious: decades after first drawing fire, American artist Sally Mann, for one, continues to have her work scrutinized for its ostensibly eroticized images of children. With the internet metastasizing with AI deepfakes, and questions forced by the revelation of Jeffrey Epstein's vast predatory network, it's daunting to hypothesize how Langer's case would play out today.

by José Teodoro
José Teodoro's prose has appeared in publications such as *Brick*, *Geist*, and *The Literary Review of Canada*. He is the award-winning author of numerous works for the stage, as well as the book *Nothing But Time: Conversations with Peter Mettler on Life and Cinema*.

CANADIAN AND LEGAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE REPORT

Lori Sterling
Chair

Thank you to the Canadian and Legal Affairs Committee which now includes Ira Wells and Grace Westcott.

An important project now in progress is a commitment to work with pro bono criminal law counsel to update our guidebooks for the public to know their legal rights in four different situations: cellphone searches, protests and demonstrations, public photography and prisoners' right to read. This work is much needed due to evolving caselaw in these areas.

On March 12, after review by the Committee, PEN issued a statement condemning the online harassment of journalist Rachel Gilmore following articles she wrote on far-right extremism.

The Committee continues to work on the pressing issue of digital transnational repression. This type of repression, a part of the broader category of transnational repression, occurs when foreign states target politically exiled writers in Canada as well as regime critics online. The repression typically entails harassment and threats using cyber technology and geo-location tracking. China and India have been identified as perpetrators of this kind of unlawful conduct. There is increasing concern that digital transnational repression will escalate, not only due to AI and technology, but also recent policy positions in Canada that focus on economic trade with foreign states with poor human rights track records. PEN is currently monitoring House of Commons Committee hearings on this topic and advocating for regulation of foreign countries who engage in this behaviour, as well as enhanced domestic policing.

PEN signed onto a letter from Press Progress calling for Anti-SLAPP legislation in Alberta. Other provinces have successfully implemented this legislation to assist writers who report on public officials and events. The anti-SLAPP statute permits an expedited hearing to dismiss frivolous cases of defamation and libel which reduces both the cost of litigation and the chill on free expression.

The Committee also reviewed new regulatory legislation from British Columbia dealing with the powers of disciplinary bodies to investigate and prosecute health professions. After consideration, it was decided not to issue any statements as the proposed legislation is aligned with legislation that already exists in other provinces to ensure appropriate oversight of health professionals. Having said this, PEN will continue to monitor implementation to ensure the use of the proposed powers is reasonable.

Last but certainly not least, the Committee has been monitoring two pieces of legislation that impact writers' free expression. The first is Bill C-63, the Online Harms Bill, which died on the order paper in January 2025. Prior to the Bill dying, the government had agreed to split the child protection measures from the more contentious, broader internet regulations. PEN had spoken out against proposed amendments to the Criminal Code and Human Rights Act in Bill C-63, and it is likely those provisions would not be part of a new Bill.

With a majority government now in place, the government has announced it is moving forward with a new Online Harms Bill. It will start with regulation of online harms that impact children. On March 12, 2026, the government convened an expert advisory panel on online safety to discuss emerging issues related to AI, chatbots and AI companions, as well as other trends that have the potential to increase online harms impacting children. It is quite possible that the Digital Safety Commission, the Ombudsperson role and age-based restricted access to social media will be part of the new Bill.

The second Bill that the Committee is monitoring is Bill C-22, the Lawful Access Bill, which was introduced March 12, 2026. This Bill is part of a border security package and provides legal authorities to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) to obtain information and data from electronic service providers (ESPs). The Bill limits the kind of information that can be requested and sets a test of "reasonable grounds to suspect" that information requested will assist in an investigation of an offence. It also includes the ability of police and CSIS to require ESPs to retain information related to private communications for up to a year. PEN is currently considering its position on this Bill.

2000s

Notes & Recollections

The “Solzhenitsyn of Iran” came to Canada in 1997 as a refugee, with the help of Ron Graham, then president. Within four years, Reza Baraheni was elected president of PEN Canada. Nowhere else would a new immigrant, even of his stature, have been so embraced so quickly.

There was an openness all around. ‘Cities of Asylum’ were being created in Europe for persecuted writers, with municipalities providing a home and comfort for a year or more. When PEN Canada was elected chair of PEN International’s Exiles Network, Isobel Harry, our executive director, helped place 27 writers across Canada in universities, community colleges, public libraries and other institutions, including Massey College, George Brown College, and the Banff Centre. PEN Canada also established a Writers in Exile committee, led by Munir Pervaiz and then Mary Jo Leddy. They met monthly, had dinner, read each other’s writings. Canada was held up as a model.

Haroon Siddiqui, President (2003-2005),
board member PEN International (2007-2013)

“Literature~~, national though it may be in origin,~~ knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people ...”

— A change to the PEN International Charter, adopted in 2003 on the initiative of Reza Baraheni. The first tinkering of the charter since 1948, it was a signal of a new internationalist lens.

2002
PEN, guided by Clayton Ruby, warns that proposed anti-terrorism legislation Bill C-36 could hurt advocacy on behalf of prisoners of conscience labeled terrorists by oppressive regimes.

2004
Ottawa Citizen reporter Juliet O’Neill is charged by RCMP for possessing leaked information on the Maher Arar case. PEN supports O’Neill, who refuses to name her sources.

2006
PEN defends children’s book “Three Wishes: Palestinian and Israeli Children Speak,” removed from Toronto public school libraries after objections from Canadian Jewish Congress.

2008
PEN supports Ezra Levant (published Danish cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed) and Mark Steyn (controversial column about Islam): “Neither complaint should ever have been accepted by a human rights commission.”

2009
PEN Writers in Exile, with Weyni Mengesha, develops the *TAXI Project*, a documentary play featuring four writers resettled in Canada: Emma Ari Beltrán, Martha Kuwee Kumsa, Goran Simic and Sheng Xue.

2009
Supreme Court creates a new libel defence, “responsible communication,” in two PEN cases, *Grant v Torstar Corp*. and *v. Cusson*. Journalists are now protected once they have made reasonable efforts to verify their facts.

2009

JIANG WEIPING CHINA

Jiang Weiping spent six years in prison for using his journalism to expose corruption among the Chinese ruling elite. He did not see his family for almost a decade, and lost everything, including any hope of a future in China. In a poem composed in his cell, Jiang wrote to his young daughter, then with his wife in Toronto:

> **I can't help but shiver on these cold nights**
> **but feel better knowing that your mother's love**
> **covers you like spring rain**

The case of Jiang Weiping spanned a decade. Starting in the 1990s, the fearless journalist from the northeast, using the pen name Wen Qingtian, began to publish investigations into how unchecked power and wealth was corrupting officials. Foremost among these officials was Bo Xilai, then governor of Liaoning province and son of a legendary Communist party elder.

First detained in late 2000, likely at Bo's behest, Jiang remained in prison, suffering torture and untreated illness, until January 2006. Years of sustained pressure from outside China may have helped shorten his sentence. Likewise the tireless efforts of his wife, Stella Li (her Chinese name is Li Yangling), first while still in China and enduring her own injustices, and then from Canada, where she sought refuge in 2004, along with their child.

PEN Canada assisted in securing permission for Jiang's family to settle in Toronto, found them a little financial support, and then campaigned on his behalf. Some of the work was public, but much went on in back rooms, enlisting our government to lobby the Chinese to reunite him with his loved ones. Jiang remained under house arrest after his release, scraping by as a calligrapher and denied a passport. Again, PEN Canada did what it could, creating the One Humanity Award and getting the prize money to him in China.

Not until 2009 was he allowed to go into exile. He finally joined his family in Toronto that year, again with the quiet aid of PEN Canada. An email sent to PEN staff celebrated the conclusion of a long, difficult but ultimately successful campaign: "Jiang Weiping left at dawn this morning and should be in Toronto by midnight."

No surprise to any of us who admired Jiang Weiping from afar and then got to know him in Toronto, the decade of forced silence did not put him off. Once settled in Canada, he resumed his journalism, mostly for on-line publications in Hong Kong. His investigative work between 2010 and 2012, once more focused on Bo Xilai, lately made a member of the national politburo and chief secretary of Chongqing, the enormous city in Sichuan, was widely credited with playing a part in forcing Bo from office. Bo Xilai wound up sentenced to life in prison in 2013.

Continuing to expose corruption from an apartment in Toronto didn't spare Jiang Weiping being harassed, his home computer frequently hacked. Dissidents outside China faced — and continue to face — repression at the hands of their own government, and few transnational voices of conscience had proven as effective as this solitary journalist. Luckily, that original pen name of Wen Qingtian identified an indomitable spirit. "Qingtian," meaning a clear sky in Mandarin, is also used to describe an upright and honest official. Until his death in 2025, Jiang Weiping remained that official in exile, loyal to his principles, and to the truth.

by Charlie Foran
Between 1998-2013, Charlie Foran served on PEN Canada boards for seven years, the final two as president. He is the author of twelve books.

WRITERS IN EXILE COMMITTEE REPORT

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie
Chair

WHEN SILENCE CROSSES BORDERS: EXILED WRITERS REHEARSE DEMOCRACY AT PEN CANADA

As PEN marks 100 years in Canada, I reflect on this milestone not only with admiration, but also with a sense of contrast shaped by my experience across different institutions. Serving as Chair of the Writers in Exile Committee, I witnessed the strength and resilience of PEN Canada, while recalling with disappointment the short-lived existence of PEN Ethiopia — once a vital centre within the volatile East African PEN network, sustained for only three years.

This contrast raises a fundamental question: what sustains democracy? The answer, I believe, lies in the durability of institutions that protect freedom of expression. Liberty depends not only on ideals, but on structures that uphold them. From parliamentary protections of speech to a free press, from vibrant public spheres to independent universities, these frameworks form the "marketplace of ideas," where truth can emerge through open exchange.

In the Global North, such institutions evolved alongside relatively stable political systems and became embedded in law, culture, and civic life. In contrast, many institutions in the Global South remain fragile, often disrupted by political instability, limited resources, censorship, or conflict. The case of PEN Ethiopia reflects this vulnerability, where promising initiatives struggle despite urgent need. Strengthening institutional resilience in these regions is therefore not optional—it is essential to democratic survival.

Through the Writers in Exile Committee, PEN Canada continues to support writers displaced by repression, offering not only protection but also a platform for their voices. Over the past three years, the group has grown into a vibrant and visible collective. Its 2023 anthology, *The Uncaged Voice*, brought together 16 writers from across the globe, while the "Voices of Freedom" reading series—held three times annually—has created a space for powerful storytelling and dialogue.

These activities do more than amplify marginalized voices; they foster mutual understanding. Listening to firsthand accounts of censorship and persecution broadens public awareness in Canada and strengthens democratic consciousness. This work is not only humanitarian—it is institutional. It helps rebuild, even across borders, the ecosystems necessary for intellectual freedom.

At 100 years, PEN Canada stands as proof that freedom of expression depends on sustained institutional commitment. The challenge ahead is to extend that sustainability globally, ensuring that writers everywhere can rely on enduring structures that protect their voices. Democracy, ultimately, is only as strong as the institutions that uphold it.

2010s

Notes & Recollections

In October 2015, following the PEN International Congress in Québec City, four writers associated with PEN Ethiopia facing grave persecution in Ethiopia because of their writing—their homes had just been searched because of their involvement with PEN—made the decision to stay on in Canada. To have four fellow writers suddenly needing our support changed my sense of the work we do, and its individual human scale. It meant finding them winter coats and a place to sleep, and filing refugee applications, efforts made by an angelic host of PEN people. At the same time, we affirmed their inherent dignity, not just as refugees but as fellow writers, intellectuals, and scholars.

I saw a different side to PEN's mission in 2017, when we welcomed Salman Rushdie at a gala in Toronto to mark the 25th anniversary of his 1992 appearance at a PEN Canada event. The 1992 event was his first major public appearance following the fatwa; in 2017, Rushdie was clear he wasn't with us to look backward. The greatest threats to free expression, he told the guests, currently comes from the Left. Until then, the event felt like a meeting in a Gospel revival tent, with people clapping and cheering. The room went suddenly very silent. And not to mix denominational metaphors, but this was Rushdie, who when it comes to aiding writers in peril and defending freedom of expression, has papal authority.

Randy Boyagoda, novelist, professor of English, and president of PEN Canada (2015-2017)

"Rushdie was challenging, not congratulating, the adoring audience. This is the work of PEN, too — to never grow complacent in presuming we are always on the right side"

2013
PEN commissions a public mural in Toronto, featuring imprisoned writers, still on view on Gould Street. PEN also designs an interactive forum at the AGO as part of an Ai Weiwei exhibit.

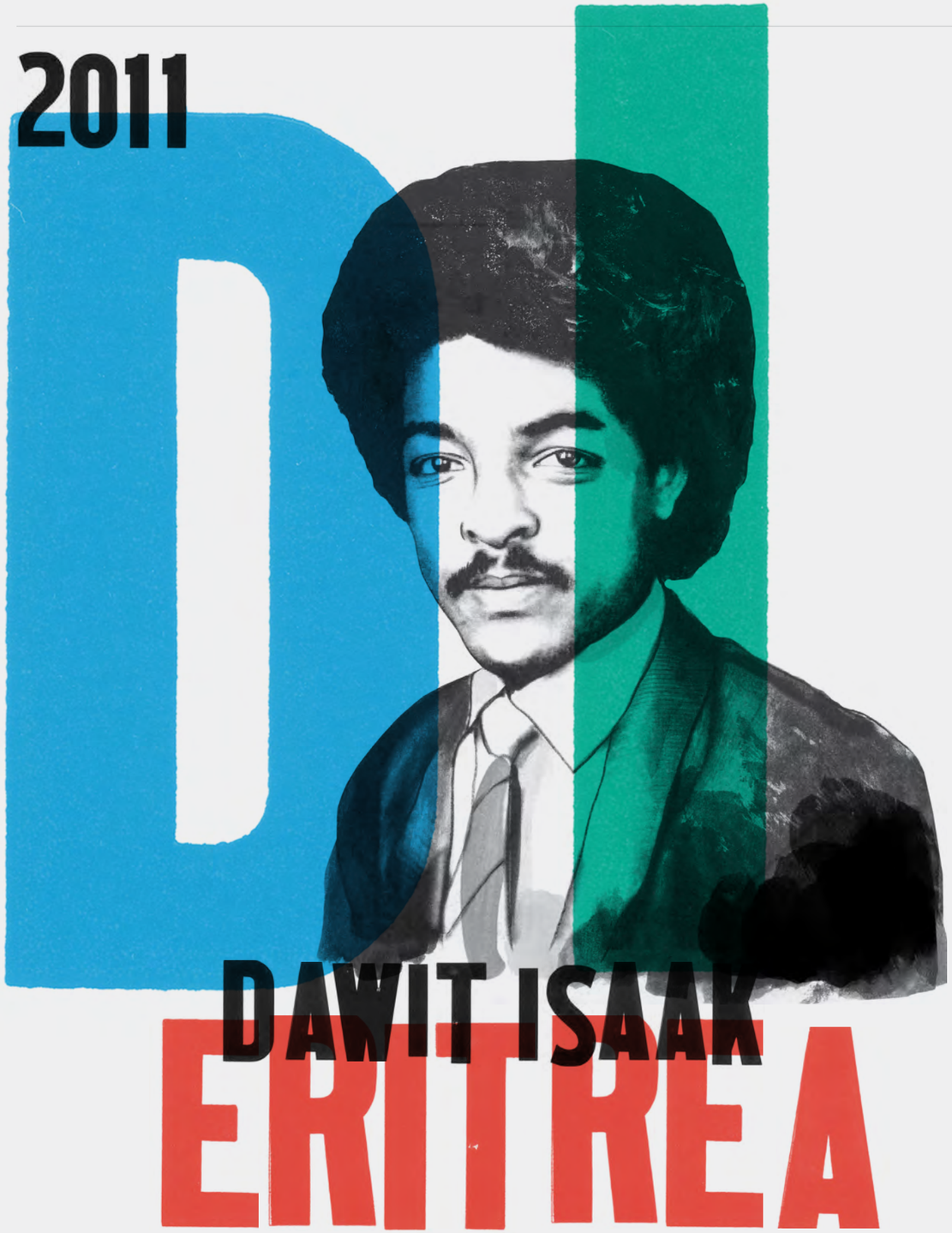
2014
PEN is one of 56 organizations audited since 2012 by the Canada Revenue Agency for its political activities. Member and future president Grace Westcott joins a consultation panel, arguing for lifting limits on political activity.

2014
PEN Canada travels to Honduras, where fifty journalists have been murdered in a decade, to meet with writers, human rights activists, and government officials. The visit spurs the creation of PEN Honduras.

2015
A Know Your Rights project from PEN counts guides such as *Can the Police Search My Phone?, Public Photography is No Crime* and *Prisoners' Reading Rights.*

2017
PEN travels to Guatemala to offer security training workshops for some of the region's most vulnerable writers, Indigenous women in community radio facing threats and violence.

2019
PEN Canada objects to police blockade at the Wet'suwet'en protests.



On the day in 2010 when I first walked into PEN Canada's office, the sky was hopeful and blue. It looked less hopeful when I left after learning of an Eritrean dissident, whose story I still carry with me today.

By then Dawit Isaak had already been missing for close to ten years. In September 2001, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki forced the closure of his country's independent media, and twelve journalists were imprisoned for dissent. Isaak was arrested on September 23.

He was a playwright as well as a journalist. He had returned to Eritrea in 1993 after a six-year exile in Sweden, where he'd acquired Swedish citizenship. He was never tried or formally charged, and, although he was unexpectedly released for two days in November 2005, he was immediately detained again while seeking medical attention. Since then, his wife and three children have received neither contact nor proof of life.

In 2011, PEN Canada marked the tenth anniversary of Isaak's arrest with a public event at what was then Ryerson University. I stood in the corner of a room in the School of Journalism as celebrated authors Camilla Gibb, Karen Connelly, Sheila Heti, Rosemary Sullivan, and Susan Swan read letters they'd written to Isaak and his colleagues, assuring them that they'd not been forgotten.

Later that year on November 15, PEN's Day of the Imprisoned Writer, I joined other volunteers in stopping passersby on Toronto's streets, asking each to pose for photos while holding a picture of Isaak. Those who obliged were featured on PEN's website. Fifteen years later, I wonder how many still remember him.

In the years since, Brendan de Caires, PEN Canada's executive director, and I have spoken about Isaak at every opportunity to scholars, writers, and politicians. We've arranged publications of op-ed pieces in major Canadian newspapers. We've participated in events where members of the Eritrean diaspora opposed to Afwerki's regime came close to blows with its supporters.

A fierce ally who always stood alongside us then was Aaron Berhane. He was the former editor-in-chief of the Eritrean newspaper Setit, who, unlike Dawit, was able to evade capture in 2001 to eventually settle in Canada. Aaron was reunited with his family nine years later, but, in May 2021, COVID-19 took him from all of us.

That fall, the Raoul Wallenberg Centre for Human Rights, along with PEN Canada and other international advocacy groups, hosted a panel discussion on Dawit's then 20-year imprisonment and called for sanctions against Eritrean officials responsible. Another petition was presented to the Canadian House of Commons in 2023.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Isaak's disappearance. PEN International, with PEN Centres around the world, has renewed the call for his freedom, as well as those of the others imprisoned in 2001. The whereabouts of Isaak and the rest remain unknown. We don't know whether we will ever see them again. But the Booker Award-winning novelist Ben Okri has published an open letter to the writers, assuring them, just as the Canadian writers did in 2011, that they are not forgotten.

by Rui Umezawa
Rui Umezawa is the author of such books as *The Truth About Death and Dying* and *Strange Light Afar: Tales of the Supernatural from Old Japan*.

WRITERS IN PERIL COMMITTEE REPORT

At the 2023 Nobel ceremony, Narges Mohammadi's children displayed a large photograph that she had specifically requested because it "expresses how she wants to lead her life – looking happy in colourful garments, exposing her hair, and with a steady gaze towards us."

That gaze has unsettled Iran's theocracy like few others. Over the last twenty years, Mohammadi's tireless campaigns for basic human rights have provoked the authorities into targeting her with no fewer than 13 arrests, five convictions, and prison sentences that total 31 years, with an additional 154 lashes. Released on a medical furlough in December 2024, Narges was rearrested a year later, after speaking out at a ceremony to honour the lawyer and human rights advocate Khosrow Alikordi. At the beginning of May 2026, she was rushed to a local hospital in northwest Iran after collapsing from a suspected heart attack. As of this writing, prison officials have refused to transfer her to facilities that could provide better treatment.

By the time he received a 20-year prison sentence in February 2026 – reduced, negligibly, to 18 years in light of his age and infirmity – the Hong Kong publisher Jimmy Lai had spent most of the previous five years in solitary confinement. Lai was found guilty on one count of "conspiracy to commit collusion with foreign forces" and for a conspiracy to "publish seditious publications." It hardly needs saying that this is effectively a death sentence for an ailing 78-year-old man.

The Cuban poet and activist María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez has spent a similar amount of time in jail since being arrested, along with her sister Angélica, following anti-government protests in July 2021. She was convicted in March 2022 on a variety of trumped-up charges including conspiracy to commit crimes and the assault of a police officer, and received a 7-year prison sentence. María has repeatedly suffered serious mistreatment throughout her incarceration.

These painful facts about PEN Canada's imprisoned Honorary Members – not forgetting the 25 years that Dawit Isaak has spent in Eritrea's jails, without charge or trial – must be recalled whenever we speak of the courage needed to resist repressive governments.

The PEN Canada Emergency Fund, first introduced in 2014, has in its lifetime delivered over $76,000 in aid. The fund began by helping seven writers as they navigated the refugee claims process in Canada. Since then, the fund now helps those in dire situations abroad, including those fleeing violence and in need of medical care related to persecution.

Because of our donors, PEN Canada was able to more than double its relief payments to persecuted writers in 2025, sending more than $23,000 in one-time emergency grants across the world, including to Chinese dissidents, Palestinian, Egyptian, Afghan, and Iranian writers fleeing persecution.

In addition to this, as mentioned in last year's annual report, PEN Canada made a $10,000 contribution in 2025 to the global PEN Emergency Fund (PEF), and then in March 2026 we made an additional contribution of $5,000 CAD. The PEF is based in the Netherlands, facilitated by the PEN Secretariat, and delivers discreet financial assistance to at-risk writers.

As we watch America's allegedly robust media, military and tech sectors bend the knee when confronted with a fraction of the pressure these writers have faced, the fragility of fundamental democratic freedoms – even in notionally "mature" democracies – has become painfully evident. The recent global drift towards authoritarianism has meant that NGOs like PEN are playing an increasingly vital role in defending the embattled public sphere in which political liberties are exercised, and contested. There has never been a more important moment to support the defense of freedom of expression.

THE RECENT GLOBAL DRIFT TOWARDS AUTHORITARIANISM HAS MEANT THAT NGOS LIKE PEN ARE PLAYING AN INCREASINGLY VITAL ROLE IN DEFENDING THE EMBATTLED PUBLIC SPHERE IN WHICH POLITICAL LIBERTIES ARE EXERCISED, AND CONTESTED.

2020s

Notes & Recollections

In 2020, we nominated an Iranian feminist blogger, H, for a program announced by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to resettle human-rights defenders repressed in their home countries. While we waited for the roll-out of that program, H's situation on the ground became increasingly dangerous. With the immense skill and humanity of the late Peter Showler, a Board member, and former chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board, we managed to get her a temporary residence permit in 2021. With the government program still in limbo, we supported her resettlement. Joan Leishman, the late great CBC journalist and humanitarian, put her up in her home. After much effort, H's son followed later.

H's experience is a dramatic reminder of how exile provides a new beginning, yes, but also loss, and the pain of dislocation, with language itself now a barrier to expression. An exile's newfound sense of safety can be fragile, as so many face continued repression online, by the very governments they only just escaped. Knowing this, we try to help them find their voices in Canada, and be recognized within our writer-in-exile community as who they most profoundly are: writers.

Grace Westcott, lawyer and president of PEN Canada (2021-2025)

2021
After Kabul falls to the Taliban, PEN receives hundreds of pleas for help. PEN advocates on behalf of Afghan women journalists, urging Ottawa to simplify the immigration process for those at risk.

2022
A new PEN series, Voices of Freedom, featuring new work by writers living in exile launches at Toronto's Hirut Café.

2023
PEN speaks out on digital transnational repression of dissidents and the killing and silencing of writers and journalists in the devastating war in Gaza.

"As Margaret Atwood said in a PEN talk a few years ago, 'you'd be surprised how many of these things are just individual efforts by people who decide they're going to do something.'"

2024

TALA MOTAZEDI

IRAN

There's a scene in the film *Orca* where the screenwriter, Tala Motazedi, crosses the frame just as her main character is walking into a restaurant. The cameo is brief, but if you look closely, you might catch a wry smile crossing Motazedi's face, exposing a flicker of something subversive.

Orca tells the real-life story of the endurance swimmer Elham Asghari, a survivor of domestic abuse who fought Iranian authorities to be recognized as an athlete. It was a difficult film to make. Motazedi's earlier work had put the experience of Iranian women under the cinematic lens. But *Orca* was overtly political, exposing a state apparatus obsessed with policing women's bodies, a dangerous critique to make in Iran. It began a chapter that would end with Motazedi exiled in Canada.

Her experience would be familiar to dissident artists. Censors at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance called her in and accused her of moral depravity and anti-regime activity. Why would she want to make a film about a female swimmer if not to expose a woman's body on camera? Why did she depict policemen ramming into Asghari with a speedboat, injuring her badly? (This happened to Asghari.) Was she insulting the police? They also attacked her personal life, demanding to know why a woman in her late thirties was still single. A queer woman in Iran, who had faced censors throughout her career, Motazedi was an adept dissembler. She made up a fake fiancé who worked abroad; they were madly in love and planned to marry when he returned.

Orca was completed but banned inside Iran. Not long after, in September 2022, Jina Mahsa Amini was arrested for violating hijab laws by the Iranian morality police and died in their custody. Motazedi and other women in Iranian cinema defiantly removed their headscarves and joined street protests. They were arrested and banned from the industry. Motazedi left Iran subsequently for Canada.

"The exiled writer," Reza Baraheni has written, "goes through the process of a double alienation: the first one from his home country; the second from the host country, of which he knows little." Freedom, in other words, comes at a cost. But in Canada Motazedi found something more. She met likeminded peers through PEN Canada's Writers in Exile community. She was named PEN Writer-in-Residence at George Brown College in 2024. She is now married.

She was also free to pursue her first literary love: horror. Horror was a natural fit for a storyteller who had come face to face with monsters throughout her life. In Iran, the horror genre is narrowly permissible but circumscribed by the regime's religious and political rules: djinn possession, for instance, is acceptable, because djinns are part of folkloric traditions and considered God's creation. Nonetheless, stories of possession must operate within the framework of regime ideology — afflicting only women, who are supposedly weak. And they must never be metaphors for social or political commentary.

Motazedi's new scripts transcend those limitations. Her latest work — including the short film *Hoof* and the feature *The Healing* — uses the genre's conventions to tackle themes of exile and freedom from the perspectives of queer women escaping Iran's deadly strictures.

Motazedi is decidedly not among the Iranian diaspora cheering the current war, whose victims are, she knows, millions of Iranians. But she understands the rage, and hopes the war's critics will not condemn those who support it, without first hearing their stories. For her, there is no going back. Exile is a relief, and an opportunity to re-create herself. When one looks back at that cameo, her mischievous smile takes on new meaning. She prevailed.

by Adnan Khan
Adnan Khan is currently writing a book that explores Istanbul, Turkey from the perspective of its exile communities.

HONORARY MEMBERS

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.

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

HONORARY MEMBERS

CUBA

María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez

Cuban poet and activist María Cristina Garrido Rodríguez is continuing to serve a seven-year prison sentence imposed after she was convicted on March 10, 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 Garrido, she went on hunger strike for five days in September 2022 in protest of their continued detention. In November 2023, Garrido sent an audio message to PEN talking about censorship in Cuba and the power of art.

Garrido was born in Quivicán, Mayaquebé in 1982. Her poetry and artistic vision have led her to reflect and write about her daily life, while her career as an activist has led her to join the Cuban Women's Network, where she supports the visibility of women in various spaces. Garrido is a member of the Vuelta abajo por Cuba Foundation and a member of the Latin Federation of Rural Women (FLAMUR). 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*) was published in 2023 by the Spanish publishing house Deslinde and highlights the challenges faced by Garrido during her political imprisonment, including ill-treatment, isolation, surveillance, and depression, among others.

ERITREA

The following Eritrean journalists have been detained incommunicado without trial for almost 25 years and are honorary members of PEN Canada: **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas*), **Yusuf Mohamed Ali** (editorin-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 September 2001, Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki forced the country's independent newspapers to close and 13 journalists were arrested. Those who remain alive are considered the longest-detained journalists in the world. Government officials have denied that a clampdown took place in 2001, saying that the detainees had been sent to perform national service.

The whereabouts, state of health and wellbeing or fate of all remain unknown. Ali, Abdelkader, Habtemichael, Haile, and Ghebreyesus are believed to have died in custody due to harsh conditions, lack of medical attention, and reported torture. Habteab and Yohannes have not been heard from.

HONG KONG

Jimmy Lai

A writer, publisher and pro-democracy activist with UK citizenship, Jimmy Lai has been held in prolonged solitary confinement since December 2020 for his journalism and peaceful activism.

After four earlier convictions, he was sentenced in December 2022 to five years and nine months' imprisonment for allegedly violating the terms of a commercial lease. In December 2023, Lai was charged with two counts of 'conspiracy to collude with foreign forces' under Hong Kong's National Security Law, and one count of 'conspiracy to produce seditious publications' under Hong Kong's colonial-era sedition law. Prosecutors cited 161 editions of *Apple Daily*, the newspaper Lai founded in 1995, as evidence of sedition. Lai pleaded not guilty to all charges. In August 2024, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention found his detention to be arbitrary and called for his immediate release.

On December 15, 2025, Hong Kong's High Court found Lai guilty on all three charges, and on February 9, 2026, he was sentenced to 20 years' imprisonment. The penalty is the harshest sentence handed down in a national security case in Hong Kong. Now 78, Lai will likely spend the remainder of his life in prison.

Born on December 8, 1947, Lai is a veteran advocate for human rights and freedom of expression. *Apple Daily* was once Hong Kong's most influential pro-democracy newspaper before it was forced to close on June 24, 2021. Lai is also the author of more than 20 books. He was the 2024 recipient of the PEN Canada One Humanity Award.

IRAN

Narges Mohammadi

Writer, journalist, human rights defender, and Nobel Peace laureate Narges Mohammadi was assaulted and detained in December 2025, almost a year after her 2024 release on medical grounds.

On December 12, 2025, Mohammadi was violently detained in Mashhad city while attending a memorial service for Iranian human rights lawyer Khosrow Alikordi, found dead in suspicious circumstances earlier that month. Mohammadi called her family on December 14, sounding unwell and informing them that she had been hospitalized twice due to injuries sustained from plain-clothed agents who hit her with batons on the head and neck and threatened to kill her. Mohammadi suffers from severe ill-health, including a neurological disorder that can result in seizures, temporary partial paralysis, and a pulmonary embolism for which she has been denied essential medication.

In February 2026, after an unfair trial, Mohammadi was transferred to a prison in Zanjan province after receiving additional sentences for national security charges, totalling seven-and-a-half years' imprisonment, two years of internal exile and a two-year travel ban.

Mohammadi, born on April 21, 1972, is the author of *White Torture* (Oneworld, 2022), which documents the use of solitary confinement against women prisoners in Iran. She is the former Vice-President and spokesperson of the Defenders of Human Rights Center (DHRC). She has faced lengthy prison time for multiple unjust sentences, totalling 35 years' imprisonment and 154 lashes, a travel ban and various restrictions on her social and political activism, imposed as reprisals for her human rights activism across over 14 years.

RELEASED SEPTEMBER 2025

ALAA ABD EL-FATTAH

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

In September 2025 he was released from prison after receiving a presidential pardon, following almost six years of arbitrary detention. Following his release, Abd el-Fattah joined his family in the UK, where his mother, academic and activist Leila Soueif, had gone on an extended hunger strike. Coinciding with his arrival in the UK, an online campaign called for Abd el-Fattah's deportation in relation to historical tweets, which he unequivocally apologized for.

Arrested in September 2019, Abd el-Fattah had been sentenced to five years in prison in 2021 on trumped-up charges including 'joining an illegal organization,' 'spreading false news,' and 'misusing social media' after a grossly unfair trial before the Emergency State Security Court, but his release date was not scheduled until January 2027, as his pre-trial detention period was not taken into account. While held, Abd el-Fattah was subjected to torture and other ill-treatment and held in deplorable prison conditions without access to a lawyer and British consular visits as well as prohibited from accessing books and newspapers, all of which impacted his health. In 2022, Abd el-Fattah underwent a lengthy hunger strike in protest at his conditions of detention and to call attention to the human rights situation in Egypt. He had previously served another unjust five-year sentence for participating in a peaceful protest in 2013.

Born on November 18, 1981, dual British-Egyptian national Alaa Abd el-Fattah is the author of *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated* (2022, Seven Stories Press), which compiles some of his profoundly influential writings and has received widespread acclaim. He was recognized with the PEN Canada One Humanity Award in 2023.

PUBLIC EVENTS REPORT AND PRIZES 2025 2026

LITERARY & MARQUEE EVENTS

Gender, Generation, and Indo-Trinidadianness
Friday, May 30, 2025
Moderated by Dr. Alissa Trotz, this conversation featured Tessa Alexander, Heidi McKenzie, and Shani Mootoo. Presented in partnership with the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Toronto.

An evening with Arundhati Roy, by Another Story Bookshop
Friday, September 12, 2025
In conversation with Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Roy celebrated her new memoir, Mother Mary Comes to Me, and discussed love, grief, memory and liberation.

Word on the Street Festival
Saturday & Sunday, Sept 27-28, 2025
PEN held a booth at this annual festival, which each year hosts hundreds of author readings and a vibrant marketplace of books and magazines in Canada.

An Evening with Olive Senior
Wednesday, October 8, 2025
Melanie Newton spoke with renowned Jamaican writer, Olive Senior, one of the most influential voices in Caribbean literature. Presented in partnership with the Centre for Caribbean Studies, University of Toronto.

Uplifting Islamic Voices, Toronto Public Library event
Friday, October 10, 2025
A literary evening on the rich diversity of Islamic perspectives and experiences. Featuring Farzana Doctor, Jamal Saeed, Mostafa Al-A'sar and Saima S Hussain, and moderated by Haroon Siddiqui.

Graeme Gibson Talk: Notes on the New America
Tuesday, October 28, 2025
Rachel Maddow and Rebecca Solnit discussed the seismic changes across the US political landscape. Moderated by Nahlah Ayed for CBC IDEAS, with a personal introduction from Margaret Atwood.

Drawn to the Page, a webinar series for young writers
October 2025
This biweekly webinar series was designed for young writers to develop their craft and purpose as an author. Recent winners of the RBC/PEN Canada New Voices Award discussed what pulls them to the page, and consider, in dialogue with their mentors, collaborators or award-winning peers, how writers respond to the social and political challenges of their time.

- **Writing out of the Abyss: Black Literature's Creative Rebellions**
  Wednesday, Oct 1, 2025
  On Black writers working to transform a traumatic history of suppression, marginalization and erasure into literature. Featuring Georgio Russell and Roger Reeves, with Esi Edugyan.
- **Shadow Histories Across Genres**
  Wednesday, October 15, 2025
  On the ethics of writing about ancestral and cultural history, balancing memory and research, and incorporating literal and emotional truths into writing. Featuring Christine Wu and Larissa Lai, with Charlie Foran.
- **The Power of the Pen in Troubled Times: Crafting Change in Apocalypse**
  Wednesday, October 22, 2025
  On the writer's role in a world of ongoing genocides, resurgent authoritarianism, and a worsening climate crisis, including the obligation of the writer to spur, stir, and bolster revolutions. Featuring Em Dial and Riley Yesno, with Jaclyn Desforges.

An Evening with author Canisia Lubrin
Thursday, Nov 13, 2025
This celebration of Lubrin's new book, *The World After Rain*, featured Lubrin in conversation with Souvankham Thammavongsa and poetry readings by Georgio Russell and Anna Sokolova. Presented in partnership with the Carol Shields Prize, the Centre for Caribbean Studies, and New College, University of Toronto.

PUBLIC EVENTS REPORT AND PRIZES

PEN Canada Awards Ceremony
Friday, Nov 28, 2025
Our annual event to celebrate a year of advocacy, literature and free expression, and award three annual PEN prizes. This event featured poetry readings, an interview with Hazrat Wahriz, and was hosted by Ira Wells, President of PEN Canada.

Freedom to Read: Why Society Needs Intellectual Risk
Wednesday, February 25, 2026
On why independent thinking is important, why access to books and ideas matter, and what's at stake when reading is constrained. Featuring Ray Robertson and Ira Wells, and moderated by Jessica Johnson. Presented in partnership with Victoria College.

Read the Room: Can Canada Survive Without a National Literature?
Tuesday March 31, 2026
For decades, Canadian books anchored a shared sense of who Canadians were. But now, publishing in Canada has collapsed. Richard Stursberg and Stephen Marche discussed what's at risk when a nation loses the infrastructure that sustains its stories.

WRITERS IN EXILE EVENTS

Made in Exile panel at the Hot Docs Festival
Monday April 28, 2025
As part of the Made in Exile program at the Hot Docs Festival sponsored by PEN Canada, this panel featured international filmmakers and PEN Canada Writers in Exile. Moderated by Kaveh Shahrooz.

Filmmakers: Liubov Dyvak, *The Longer You Bleed* (Ukraine); Timeea Mohamed Ahmed, *Khartoum* (Sudan); Areeb Zuaiter, *Yalla Parkour* (Palestine).

PEN Canada Writers in Exile panelists: Tala Motazedi (Iran); Lidiia Karpenko (Ukraine).

George Brown College Panel Discussion: Freedom of Expression in Tumultuous Times
Saturday, May 31, 2025
Previous PEN writers in residence at George Brown College joined communications professor, and panel moderator Paula Applebaum for a thought-provoking discussion on what the successful promotion of freedom of expression looks like today. Featuring Luis Horacio Nájera, Tala Motazedi, and Professor Gordana Icevska.

Voices of Freedom at Hirut Cafe
Sunday, Jun 1, 2025
Featuring Yamin Myatt Aye (Myanmar), Diary Marif (Iraq), and Jamal Saeed (Syria).

Writers in Exile panel at Victoria College
Wednesday, Sept 17, 2025
Featuring Tala Motazedi (Iran), Luis Horacio Najera (Mexico), and Mostafa Al-A'sar (Egypt), moderated by Ira Wells. Presented in partnership with Victoria College.

Voices of Freedom at Toronto Reference Library
Wednesday, Nov 12, 2025
Featuring Atefeh Khademolreza (Iran), Onder Deligoz (Turkey), Abdullah Al Imran (Bangladesh), Andersson Boscán (Ecuador), and Luis Horacio Najera (Mexico).

Voices of Freedom reading at Emmanuel College
Wednesday, March 18, 2026
Featuring Rukhshana Ahmadi (Afghanistan), Ali Sobati (Iran), Hazrat Wahriz (Afghanistan), and Jinoos Taghizadeh (Iran).

CO-SPONSORED PANELS & SCREENINGS

Vancouver screening of *The Showerhead*
Thursday November 6, 2025
Presented by the South Africa Film Festival, this documentary examined the work of celebrated political cartoonist, Zapiro, tracing his journey from anti-apartheid struggle-artist to his enduring role as a progressive commentator and freedom of expression champion in democratic South Africa.

Centre for Free Expression events co-sponsored by PEN

Freedom of Expression, Public Engagement, Democracy: What can we expect for the next ten years?
Tuesday, April 8, 2025
On what are likely to be the biggest challenges to freedom of expression and democracy in the coming ten years. Featuring Alex Himelfarb, Jordan Laffrenier, Teresa Scassa, Lisa Taylor, and James L. Turk.

Trump's War on Truth
Wednesday May 7, 2025
On the unprecedented assault on media freedoms, including lawsuits and stripping news organizations of their credentials. Featuring Susan Glasser, Katherine Jacobsen, and Craig Silverman, with moderation by Julian Sher.

Should Political Belief and Association Be Protected by Human Rights Law?
Tuesday, June 10, 2025
On whether political belief and political association have the same protections as other prohibited grounds of discrimination. Featuring Birju Dattani, Abby Deshman, Michael Gottheil, Michael Lynk, and Faisal Bhabha.

What can we learn about book banning from 400 years of the Catholic Church's Index of Prohibited Books?
Wednesday Oct 1, 2025
On what we can learn from four centuries of failed attempts at institutional censorship by the Catholic Church. Featuring James L. Turk and Robin Vose.

What does the Western media get wrong about the Middle East?
Thursday October 16, 2025
On whether Western mainstream media, in striving for balance and neutrality, spread misconceptions and myths about the conflicts in the Middle East. Featuring Hadeel Al-Shalchi, Mohamad Bazzi, Martin Lukacs, Ari Paul, and Julian Sher.

How is the attack on arts and culture in the U.S. impacting Canada?
Thursday, November 20, 2025
On what unprecedented attacks on arts and culture in the U.S. mean for Canadian artists, writers, and cultural organizations. Featuring Jordan Laffrenier, Sascha Priewe, Robin Stevenson, and Brendan de Caires.

Mapping the Threat: How Recent Federal Bills Would Erode our Rights and Freedoms
Thursday, November 25, 2025
On how legislative changes form creeping restrictions on privacy, expression and civic participation essential in our democratic society. Featuring Karen Cocq, Tamir Israel, Anaïs Bussières McNicoll, Tim McSorley, Rizwan Mohammad, and Matt Hatfield.

PUBLIC EVENTS REPORT AND PRIZES

Can Canadians' Rights Survive the Notwithstanding Clause
Wednesday, December 10, 2025
On how the Notwithstanding Clause is increasingly being invoked to deny key democratic freedoms and human rights. Featuring Eric Adams, Anaïs Bussières McNicoll, Richard Moon, and James L. Turk.

Online Age Verification Poses Serious Dangers: What are our alternatives?
Tuesday February 10, 2026
On how systems for age verification create dangerous new forms of surveillance, censorship, and exclusion. Featuring David Greene and Evan Light.

Can America Media Survive Trump and Billionaire Owners?
Thursday March 19, 2026
On the gutting of the *Washington Post*, abrupt changes at CBS, and extravagant but frivolous Trump lawsuits, and whether democracy is dying in broad daylight. Featuring Joe Davidson, Margaret Sullivan, and Max Tani, with moderation by Julian Sher.

AWARDS

Ken Filkow Prize
Recipient: Samira Mohyeddin
Jury: Dan David, Hasmik Egian, and Matt Hatfield
This annual award recognizes an individual or institution who has advanced freedom of expression in Canada, and shown courage in freeing information and ideas from restraint or interference. For ten years it has been funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton, a former PEN Canada president.

Samira Mohyeddin is a journalist, broadcaster, and documentary filmmaker. For nearly a decade, she was a producer and host at CBC Radio and CBC Podcasts. Now she is the founder of ON THE LINE MEDIA. The jury said "Mohyeddin has become a leading voice in Canada calling for the recognition of the fundamental rights of Palestinians while also condemning long-standing violations of Palestinian rights by the government of Israel. Samira has faced threats outside work, an attack on a family business, and death threats as a direct result of her journalism."

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

Marie-Ange Garrigue Prize
Recipient: Diary Marif
Jury: Dan David, Hasmik Egian, and Matt Hatfield
This annual award recognizes a Canadian citizen or permanent resident who has provided significant help to a writer or journalist outside Canada who has faced threats, violence, harassment, or imprisonment for reporting or commenting on issues of public interest. Since its inception in 2022, the prize has been generously funded by Cynthia Wine and Philip Slayton, who also fund the Ken Filkow Prize.

Diary Marif is a Canadian-Kurdish writer and freelance journalist born in Iraq. The jury recognized Marif for his work to raise awareness of the plight of Sherwan Sherwani and four other Kurdish reporters imprisoned in Iraqi Kurdistan. He documented their harsh conditions in prison, collaborated with Kurdish and Canadian activists to advocate for their release, fundraised in support of their families and advocates, offered safe houses to their relatives, and campaigned for the intervention of the Canadian government, journalists, and writers. Despite considerable risk to his own safety, Diary travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan in October 2023 and met with members of the regional parliament, journalists, and organizations urging pressure on the authorities for the release of the Sherwani.

Previous Recipients
Robina Aryubwal and Journalists for Human Rights
Joan Leishman
Mariam Al Zier

RBC / PEN Canada New Voices Award
Winners: Anna Sokolova and Georgio Russell
Jury: Shashi Bhat, Lydia Perovic, and Madeleine Thien
This year was the first time the prize has been awarded to two writers:

Georgio Russell is a Bahamian poet and a graduate of the University of the West Indies. His winning poetry collection, *Regatta of Ghosts*, was described by the jury as "evocative, compressed, and rich in history and allusion" while "boldly reclaiming the vocabulary of oppression with supreme confidence and style". As part of his PEN prize, he was mentored by Vladimir Lucien.

Anna Sokolova is a Russian-Canadian writer with an English MA in Creative Writing from the University of Toronto. Their winning poetry collection, *Fragments to a Friend*, was described by the jury as "delicious, energetic, and playfully colloquial, exploring friendship, girlhood, and the pain of longing" with "extraordinary range and a fresh, inventive voice." As part of their PEN prize, they were mentored for a year by an established writer of their choosing: Georgio with Vladimir Lucien, and Anna with Barbara Tran.

The jury also selected five finalists: Edie Reaney Chunn, Emily Gaudet, Gwen Aube, Helen Han Wei Luo, and Mona'a Malik.

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

PUBLIC EVENTS REPORT AND PRIZES

SUPPORT FOR WRITERS IN EXILE

Writing workshop with Charlie Foran
Saturday, May 31, 2025
This workshop focused on how to identify the emotional core of a specific memory and develop it into a scene that draws readers into a story.

Publishing workshop with Anna Porter
Saturday, October 18, 2025
This workshop offered practical advice on how to make a narrative compelling, as well as how to present work to a publisher or agent.

Potlucks and Lunches at Romero House
December 2025 and March 2026
These intimate gatherings in Toronto offer the opportunity for PEN Writers in Exile to connect, share ideas, and enjoy time together as a community.

English Second Language classes at George Brown College
Within its ESL classes, George Brown College reserves seats for members of the PEN Canada Writers in Exile. Each semester two spots are kept open for members, with the opportunity for those writers to complete up to two levels as part of their participation.

George Brown College PEN Writer-in-Residence
Recipient: Onder Deligoz
Deligoz is a journalist and writer from Turkey, where he reported on human rights violations and unsolved political murders. He recently completed his MA in Creative and Critical Writing from the University of Gloucestershire. He is a previous recipient of the Humber Polytechnic-PEN Writers-in-Exile scholarship (2018), during which he was mentored by Boris Fishman. He is the author of two novels.

During his residency, Onder visited George Brown College classrooms as a guest speaker on issues of freedom of expression, human rights, and the importance of democracy. In between classroom visits, he worked on his debut poetry collection, *A Mirror Reckoning*.

His residency at the College marks 21 years of the PEN Writer-in-Residence program at George Brown College, which has created opportunity for 19 members of our Writers in Exile community.

Humber Polytechnic-PEN Canada Writers-in-Exile scholarship
Recipient: Atefeh Khademolreza
Atefeh Khademolreza is an Iranian-Canadian writer and filmmaker. Her recent animated short, *Meteor*, premiered at the 2023 Toronto International Film Festival. She is a founding member of the Association of Iranian Film and Theatre Artists Abroad (AIFTAA) and holds an MFA from York University.

Since 2017, PEN Canada has offered a full scholarship for a member of the Writers in Exile community to the Humber School for Writers' graduate certificate program in creative writing. The recipient works one-on-one with one of Humber's faculty mentors on a book-length project, like a novel, volume of short stories, or poetry collection.

While at Humber, Atefeh worked under the guidance of Antanas Sileika, a Canadian-Lithuanian novelist and critic, on her debut novel, *A Grizzly Bear in Tehran*. The novel follows a young woman who dreams of becoming a journalist under a repressive regime. Atefeh calls the novel "a personal act of resistance and a testament to what it means to create under pressure."

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