

A CENTURY OF PEN

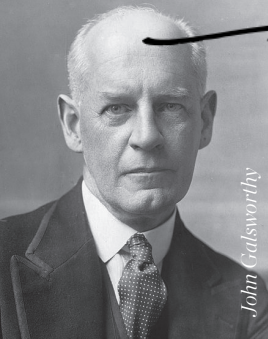
**PEN CANADA 2020/21
ANNUAL REPORT**

100

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John Galsworthy



John Galsworthy

A CENTURY OF PEN

PEN arose in the drawing rooms of Bloomsbury in the cultural aftershock of Europe's Great War. In 1921 Catherine Amy Dawson Scott and John Galsworthy started a club for "Poets, Playwrights, Essayists and Novelists" with Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, and H.G. Wells as founding members. Radclyffe Hall, D.H. Lawrence, Rebecca West and W. B. Yeats joined soon afterwards. The club hoped its gatherings might help European writers to transcend their political differences through a shared love of literature.



Catherine Amy Dawson Scott

“Although it was originally styled as a dining club for London writers, it quickly became an international organization that acted as a forum for intellectual cooperation and exchange,” writes the historian Rachel Potter.

“PEN centres sprang up across Europe, with the first international PEN gathering of eleven nations held in London in 1923. The organization soon spread beyond Europe, with PEN groups forming in Iraq, Egypt, and Argentina in the late 1920s, in India and China in 1934, and Japan in 1936. It even extended to groups without a geographical homeland. In October 1928, the Yiddish PEN centre was admitted to the International PEN club on ‘a non-territorial basis.’”

From the outset, PEN strove for inclusivity. In 1927, Galsworthy drafted a charter that said:

1. Literature, national though it may be in origin, knows no frontiers and should remain common currency between nations in spite of political and international upheavals.
2. In all circumstances, and particularly in time of war, works of art, the patrimony of humanity at large, should be left untouched by national or political passion.
3. Members of PEN will at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations.

Ninety years later, most of that language remains intact and most of PEN’s work still aspires to the breadth of Galsworthy’s original vision.

Dawson Scott embraced a similar strain of liberal internationalism. At a 1926 conference in Berlin, she wrote in her journal: “Even as individuals become families and families become communities and communities become nations, so eventually must the nations draw together in peace.” She also scolded centres that refused to admit women members, noting pointedly that this ran “contrary to the spirit of PEN.” Sadly, so did much of Europe’s resurgent nationalism. By September 1939, W.H. Auden was reflecting on a “low dishonest decade” in which Fascism had flourished.

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Seven decades later, PEN's internationalism remains a good measure of its relevance. Its ecumenical spirit has guided our own centre throughout its existence. In its first forty years, PEN Canada has helped writers in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Brazil, China, Cuba, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Guatemala, Honduras, Iran, India, Kazakhstan, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Mexico, Myanmar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Turkey, Uzbekistan, Venezuela, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. It has comforted them in prisons, helped secure their release, and provided some financial and moral support to ease the pains of exile.

From its inception, PEN Canada has remained resolutely apolitical, defending causes that have provoked conservatives, progressives and radicals in roughly equal measure. It stood with Little Sister's bookstore against an intrusive Canada Customs; it defended Eli Langer's controversial images of adolescent girls; it hosted Salman Rushdie at a gala after a fatwa called for his murder; but the centre also opposed human rights tribunals that sought to regulate "offensive" speech, and defended the speech of illiberal provocateurs. On many occasions PEN Canada has upheld the right to air views that much of its board and most of its members found shallow, distasteful, or even repellent. In a culture that has grown overly fond of outrage, it is essential that we continue to do so.

This report contains first-person accounts from three imperiled journalists who have now made Canada their home. In one of these, Martha Kumsa recalls the power of receiving a message, shortly after her imprisonment, from an organization called PEN. It began: "We know about you; you're not alone." The quiet moral force of those words is one that Dawson Scott, Galsworthy and their distinguished friends would immediately recognize, and celebrate.

THE 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.

President's Report

It is strange that PEN's hundredth anniversary should have fallen in such a difficult and troubling year. The pandemic feels like a metaphor for increasing intolerance and repression in the world. Assaults on freedom of expression have expanded, and accelerated, as the virus extends its grip.

The pandemic has forced us to find new ways of working and financing PEN Canada's activities. We cut costs to conserve cash, applied to government support programs, moved our meetings online and began a digital fundraising drive. Our special thanks go to Margaret Atwood who generously matched everything we raised up to \$25,000. We eventually surpassed our ambitious goal of raising \$50,000 to keep our programs fully funded. The result is that PEN Canada has weathered the financial uncertainties of the pandemic and will enter the next fiscal year in good shape.

While we tightened our belts, the work went on. With the Writers in Exile Committee, we began a campaign to encourage the government to make good on its promise to create a dedicated refugee stream that would bring 250 human rights defenders to Canada every year. We offered the government PEN's international expertise in identifying bona fide refugees. The effort continues. Such a program would be the first of its kind in the world.

We continued to celebrate literature. In conjunction with the Atwood family, we began the process of creating the Graeme Gibson annual lecture on the moral power of writing. Gibson was the president of PEN Canada from 1987-89 and a founder of both the Writers' Trust and the Writers' Union. The first lecture will feature Omar El Akkad in conversation with Margaret Atwood. It will form an integral part of PEN's hundredth anniversary meetings and celebrations.

Our work on freedom of expression advanced with two successful legal interventions. In the first, the court ruled against the government of Ontario's efforts to force gas station owners to affix stickers denouncing the "carbon tax" to their pumps. In the second, the court found that the federal government's amendment to the Canada Elections Act, concerning the making of false statements during an election, breached Charter guarantees of freedom of expression by not specifying that such statements had to be made knowingly.

This is my last president's report. Much to my — and no doubt everyone else's — dismay, I have become the longest-serving president in PEN Canada's history. Through all the years, it has been a great honour to have followed in the footsteps of many of Canada's most distinguished literary figures. To carry the torch once borne by Graeme Gibson, June Callwood, Timothy Findlay, Ellen Seligman, Nino Ricci, Katherine Govier, Randy Boyagoda and Philip Slayton has been a privilege.

Richard Stursberg
President, PEN Canada

Executive Director's Message

The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.

L.P. Hartley's famous opening sentence could have been written last week. The pandemic has scrambled our sense of time and estranged us from each other. Some of us have been displaced to home offices, countless others have lost jobs, homes, or lives. In the haze, we have normalized travel restrictions, disinformation, even the nonsensical argument that workers can be essential without deserving paid sick leave. The past twelve months have felt more like a decade than a year.

As an immigrant to Canada, and a citizen of fairly recent vintage, I feel a personal resonance in Hartley's line. It reminds me of an anxious childhood in a half-forgotten country, one in which violence and ethnic and political tension were the norm, not the exception. In my time at PEN, I have worked with dozens of people who share a similar trajectory, albeit with terrifying backstories. This year, more than ever, their narratives have assumed new importance.

Twenty years ago, Aaron Berhane, chair of our Writers in Exile group, narrowly escaped a media crackdown in Eritrea. (The friends and colleagues who didn't escape remain in prison—without charge or trial—to this day.) I met Aaron in 2009, after he had rebuilt his professional life and was publishing a small newspaper in Toronto. He smiled and laughed often enough, but it wasn't hard to see the toll that the long separation from his family had taken. One day he confided that there was a plan for their escape. He said this as we looked out at the waterfront in Barrie, Ontario, after a long afternoon of conversations with schoolchildren. It sounded so improbable, so foolhardy; a fearful silence descended on us. Six months later, I welcomed his wife, Miliete, to our AGM at Hart House in Toronto. A surreal, triumphant moment that taught me about the power of hope.

Aaron died suddenly at the beginning of May, less than a week after being hospitalized with Covid.

As we reflected on his passing, I kept thinking about that evening in Barrie and the many other times we had cooked up something to keep alive the advocacy for his jailed friends. Street photography, letters, public events, press coverage — the daily tedium of human rights work. Aaron did it all with unflagging patience and energy, determined to make a difference.

Hope, writes Václav Havel, is “an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed. The more unpropitious the situation in which we demonstrate hope, the deeper that hope is.” Aaron embodied this sort of hope for more than twenty years, forging ahead with quiet resolve. He wore success, and the burden of his huge losses, lightly, and with profound dignity. It was an honour to know him, and my great pleasure to be his friend. We learned of his passing as the federal government looked set to launch a fast-track immigration stream for up to 250 human rights defenders. This was a program that Aaron had helped PEN to prioritize; its likely arrival felt like a bittersweet bookend to a life well-lived.

Richard Stursberg has been the president of PEN Canada throughout my tenure as Executive Director. During that time we have sat through countless meetings with directors, supporters and prospective partners.

Richard has been unwavering in his support of our mission, always available to make introductions, sift through the details of another project, recruit a new member or help with a fundraising drive. As a result, the centre has emerged from the long months of Covid disruption as well as we could have dared to hope. I am very grateful for all that Richard has done in the last four years, and look forward to his stewardship of our Advisory Board.

With everyone in lockdown, it was no surprise that the RBC/PEN Canada New Voices award received 175 submissions. This year’s winner by unanimous vote, Emily Dial, is a self-described “Mixed-Triracial-Hybrid-Queer-Chronically-ill-Non-binary-Mongrel.” In a Q&A I asked her about this marvelous description, and the idea that “more / hyphens means more permutations.” Her answer began: “The delicious part about so many permutations is that I feel a certain degree of kinship with so many lonelines in this world.” As a chronically confused-binary-biracial-atheist, what else can I say to such a wonderful sentiment but “Amen.”

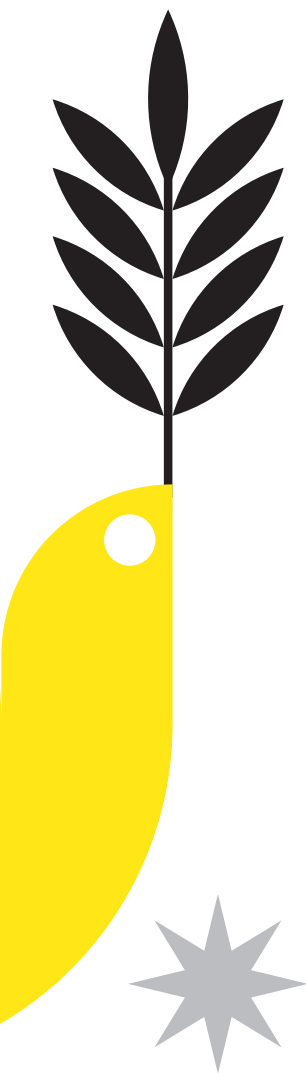
Brendan de Caires
Executive Director, PEN Canada

WE KNOW ABOUT YOU; YOU'RE NOT ALONE

MARTHA
KUMSA



Martha Kumsa is an Ethiopian journalist who was arrested in January 1980 after encouraging ethnic Oromo women to reclaim their cultural heritage. She was imprisoned without charge and tortured. She was released in September 1989 and moved to Canada shortly afterwards.



Into the dark dungeons of Ethiopia came a dazzling light tearing through the thick shadows of death. Parting the ominous clouds, a strange bird flew in with cards in its beak. It was from Amnesty and PEN International. PEN? What is that?

I ran for my dictionary, but it didn't say much about the people who were trying to reach me. The words on the cards betrayed nothing. They simply stated: We know about you; you are not alone. Oh, somebody knows about me! I thought my tormentors had hidden me from the world. Oh, I'm not alone! I thought I was abandoned by everyone—family, friends, and God. I thought I was doomed to suffer in silence and die in isolation.

That strange bird was Noah's dove and those cards were the olive branch in its beak. It brought hope into a hopeless place and fashioned a home out of homelessness. It whispered to me that there's a different world out there.

Hearts reached out and touched one another from across vast oceans and continents. And friendships flourished, drawing me to Canada.

We know about you; you're not alone. Those words are etched in my heart and soul. Forty years later, I still feel them warmly because I live them daily. Canada wasn't a bed of roses, but it gave me opportunities to start life anew. Life wasn't easy but I was never left to battle alone. Friends held my hands.

School offered a way out and I grabbed it in no time. I did my bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in ten years. I landed a tenured university job where I worked up to the ranks of a professor and retired.

Yes, mine is a success story, but this success is not my individual achievement. Folks who praise me are perplexed when I refuse to take the credit. I know brilliant people who could not achieve what I did simply because they did not have the nurturing care of my friendships. What about the kindness I received? I pay it forward.

Ethiopia is in a freefall into carnage once again. Hope raised is miserably dashed. Hundreds of thousands are suffering in its dark dungeons once again. It's now my turn to pay it forward. From firmer grounds, I send Noah's dove to inspire and give hope: *We know about you; you are not alone.* Thank you, PEN!

Martha Kuwee Kumsa

Writers in Peril Report

Peter Showler

For the past year, the Writers in Peril Committee has focused on two related projects. In December, 2019, the Prime Minister's mandate letter to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) included the instruction to establish a program to resettle up to 250 human rights defenders, specifically—*human rights advocates, journalists, and humanitarian workers*—who were at risk in their home countries.

The proposed program is a golden opportunity to protect writers at risk. Few countries offer temporary protection, and no other country offers permanent protection for human rights defenders, including writers, as a unique category. The proposed program would be a unique, expedited stream, avoiding the

logjam of millions of refugees seeking resettlement. It would provide one year of financial support for writers and their families, and, as proposed, could also resettle individuals directly from their home country rather than first requiring that they leave their country to wait in precarious exile as a refugee.

PEN Canada has a long history of assisting in the relocation of individual writers at risk to Canada. Each individual resettlement required a humanitarian exception to Canada's immigration law and entailed a long and arduous effort, often engaging multiple parties. An established pathway for writers at risk to come to Canada as permanent residents would be an ideal opportunity for PEN Canada to identify and bring several imperilled writers to Canada every year.

In May of last year, we proposed to the Minister's office and his department that PEN Canada could serve as a referral partner, both to identify writers at risk and to assist with their settlement in Canada. In the proposal, we stressed the reach of our international resources through PEN International and the unique experience of our Writers in Exile Committee in helping new arrivals to settle in Canada. Principally due to the COVID pandemic, the program—informally called “the HRD program”—has been slow to develop. A preliminary implementation plan was presented in late April with an expected implementation by September, 2021. PEN Canada should have a role as a referral partner but the extent of that role has not yet been confirmed.

In September, 2020, in order to establish PEN's capacity to refer appropriate candidates for the HRD program, we identified an Iranian blogger/journalist (“H”) in urgent need of protection. In December, working with PEN International and ICORN (International Cities of Refuge Network), we submitted an application to IRCC, providing the personal and human rights evidence to show why H was a writer and human rights advocate at risk. In late January, the department acknowledged that H merited protection, but the HRD program still had not been implemented and H did not qualify for the regular government-sponsored program for technical reasons. By early April, for humanitarian reasons, H was accepted for permanent residence in Canada although her admission is not under the HRD program, which still has not been implemented. Her arrival is expected within a few months.

We continue our advocacy efforts to encourage the Minister to implement the HRD program and accept PEN Canada as a referral partner. In that regard, Richard, our departing president, has become a wise and critical partner in developing our advocacy strategy and in speaking to key people within the government.

THE THRILL OF FREEDOM



JIANG WEIPING

Jiang Weiping is a Chinese journalist who was jailed in 2000 for “illegally providing state secrets overseas and inciting the subversion of state power” after he exposed high-level government corruption in northeastern China. He was released in January 2006, eleven months before his sentence was set to expire. He is an Honorary Member of PEN Canada.

Twelve years ago, I left authoritarian China to begin a new life in Canada. PEN helped me to get a special permit from then-Immigration Minister Jason Kenney, so I could be reunited with my family. By that point, I had been separated from my wife and daughter for almost nine years: five of them spent in prison, three under surveillance.

My new life began in 2009 as bitter winter gave way to a warm spring. After years of unstinting advocacy on my behalf, PEN Canada had given me its inaugural One Humanity award — a great honour— and it continued to offer firm and generous support. PEN helped me to speak about freedom of expression in China at international fora in Norway and Washington, places where I could use my voice freely. I was grateful for that, and for the chance to live within a country that guaranteed me democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

In the decade since my arrival, I have become a Canadian citizen. I have the right to vote and to be elected. For the first time in my life, I exercised the right to vote in Canada's last general election. Casting my ballot was a thrill; I had never experienced such freedom in China, despite living there for half a century, and working as a journalist for eighteen years.

Canada has given me the freedom to write and speak without restraint. As a freelance journalist, I have published millions of words and opened a current affairs channel on YouTube. With timely reflections and commentary on the current situation within China's ruling Politburo, and its wider society, I have criticized and exposed the authoritarian rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). My commentaries helped me to spread the idea of democracy, freedom, and rule of law to readers at home and abroad.

Three years after starting my YouTube channel, I have more than 40,000 subscribers and my videos have been watched more than twenty million times. I have had feedback from and exchanged correspondence with people from all over the world, including those who live under a dictatorship and those who long for democracy, freedom and the rule of law. The messages give me confidence and they motivate me to continue fighting against China's autocratic regime and to advocate for free expression. I hope the CCP's one-party dictatorship will end as soon as possible, so that China can become a country with free speech, like Canada. A healthy society should have different voices.

PEN Canada has worked hard to protect freedom of expression and to defend this freedom for writers and journalists all around the world. I hope it will continue to perform this important role in the future. I am profoundly grateful for everything it has done for me.

Jiang Weiping

Legal Affairs Committee

In 2020, the Legal Affairs Committee concentrated on two interventions in cases before Ontario's Superior Court of Justice. The first was in support of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association's action against the Attorney General of Ontario in the so-called "gas stickers" case. The CCLA challenged the constitutionality of Ontario's demand that explanations of certain fuel charges be affixed to every gas pump in the province.

The CCLA argued that the stickers were a form of compelled speech and violated the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms because they used partisan language to convey partisan political opinions of federal policy. PEN Canada intervened to assist the court's understanding of the contours and scope of the right of freedom expression. The court agreed with the CCLA and PEN Canada, ruling that the government cannot use legislation to compel private retailers into political expression.

Our second intervention argued that amendments to the Canada Elections Act were unconstitutional. The amendments made it an offense to attempt to influence an election by making or publishing certain kinds of false statements about political candidates or other public figures. Parliament amended the law in 2019

to remove the important requirement that, in order to be an offence, the person making the statement have knowledge that the statement being made was false.

The Canadian Constitution Foundation (CCF) and PEN Canada argued that although the threat of misinformation is present and disturbing, the amendments to Section 91 of the Act chill political expression and the free exchange of ideas. The court agreed, and found that Parliament's removal of the word "knowingly" from its prohibitions on making false statements violated Canadians' right to freedom of expression.

In both interventions, PEN Canada successfully assisted the courts in understanding the contours of the right of freedom of expression and how these issues affect PEN Canada's membership and the broader community.

PEN Canada is profoundly grateful for the outstanding *pro bono* representation by Peter Wardle and Evan Rankin of Singleton Urquhart Reynolds Vogel LLP in the first intervention and by Justin Nasserri of Ross Nasserri Barristers and Janani Shanmuganathan of Goddard & Shanmuganathan in the second.

Michael Bookman
Chair, Legal Affairs Committee

PEN CANADA
SUCCESSFULLY
ASSISTED THE
COURTS IN
UNDERSTANDING
THE CONTOURS
OF THE RIGHT
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OF EXPRESSION
AND HOW THESE
ISSUES AFFECT
PEN CANADA'S
MEMBERSHIP AND
THE BROADER
COMMUNITY.

THE UNIVERSAL FAMILY OF WRITERS



GEZAHEGN MEKONNEN DEMISSIE

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie is an Ethiopian documentary filmmaker, a board member of PEN Ethiopia and the Executive Director of Bridge Entertainment. In 2021 his newspaper New Perspective received a Community Champion award from Arif Virani, MP for Parkdale-High Park in Toronto.

I joined the universal family of writers when I was still in Ethiopia. PEN Ethiopia was formally admitted to PEN's network at the 2008 PEN Congress in Bogotá. Four years later then PEN International president, John Ralston Saul, attended our first writers' congress and said something that is still etched in my heart. "In joining PEN International, the writers of Ethiopia, whatever their condition, are joining the international family of writers," he said. "Thousands of us belong to PEN centres around the world. Almost 150 centres in more than a hundred countries, centres that represent nearly every language and culture. And now you belong."

Ethiopia became increasingly repressive and my life was threatened. After PEN International's 2015 Congress in Québec, I sought refuge in Canada along with my colleagues on the board of PEN Ethiopia. I've lived here ever since. "What a country!" I constantly tell myself. Something deep in my heart knew that this was the place for a writer, journalist, or freethinker to live.

It has taken a village to keep me afloat in this faraway land. When the congress was over, we moved to Toronto. I spent my first two nights at a writer's house — a great start for someone like me. Keith Leckie, a novelist, welcomed us with open arms. He ordered Ethiopian food and Kenyan beer. I never expected to have "injera," my favourite flatbread, in Canada. Keith's welcome opened our hearts and mouths and we told him about our lives. By coincidence, we discussed Ethiopia's fake election on the eve of Canada's 2015 election.

After the first two nights, Mary Jo Leddy and Romero house helped me to move to Lisa Clarkson's family home. The loving memory of those days is still fresh in my mind. Before we started looking for jobs, PEN's staff was thinking ahead, ensuring that we were taken care of and that everything moved ahead according to plan. Their support allowed me to think clearly about my future.

In 2019 I made *Tizita*, for CBC Short Docs, with the help of Niv Fichman and Kevin McMahon after John Ralston Saul introduced me to them. I remain deeply grateful for their support. It boosted my spirit and reassured me that I could be a journalist and filmmaker in Canada. Then, with seed money earned through a part-time job at a bakery, I launched *New Perspective* a trilingual newspaper. In the meantime, Lisa Clarkson and my friends at PEN and Romero house pushed hard to reunite me with my family. This finally happened in September 2018, on the eve of Ethiopian new year. It wouldn't have been possible without the multifaceted assistance of PEN and its supporters.

The arrival of my wife Sosina Ashenfi, and our son Hyssop Mekonnen, has transformed my personal and professional lives. The newspaper I started has now branched out into a weekly radio show, and a YouTube Channel. This wouldn't have been possible without Sosina's amazing journalistic input.

Gezahegn Mekonnen Demissie

MINWA

Supporting Indigenous Writing

Anouchka Freybe and Tanya Talaga

Minwaajimo (Ojibwe for “he/she tells a good story”), the first component of PEN Canada’s Indigenous Literary Program, is currently on hold due to the pandemic. The program aims to advance several initiatives including mentorships for young writers; book drives; conversations and events in accessible venues; and writing workshops for incarcerated members of the Indigenous community.

AJIMIO

We started the mentorship planning process in the fall of 2019. By the following spring, Tanya had contacted key members of the Indigenous education community in northern Ontario to explore a partnership between our centre and three local high schools.

Our consultation identified the following priorities for any initiative concerned with creative expression and writing:

- Access to poetry, songwriting and reading (including magazines and journals)
- Access to books, a comfortable library
- Access to storytelling groups, a book club night, and spoken word nights
- Access to hardware: Chromebooks and/or other laptops and tablets

One of the principals asked us: “What would the mentorship look like? Would it be something done in classes, or after school?” A helpful question.

While we wait for the pandemic to ease its grip on our community life, we have an opportunity to imagine creative answers to the principal’s question. How can we distinguish PEN Canada’s mentorship initiative from similar programs — particularly those that generally serve the post-secondary student community?

We are considering outreach to tech companies like Google and Microsoft, and to telecom companies like Telus, Shaw and Rogers. We will pursue these as soon as the stakeholders have been able to resume discussions about the parameters of the mentorship. Since Tanya serves on both boards, we have also been exploring a collaboration with The Writers’ Trust.

By the autumn of this year, once vaccinations have been completed, we hope the community will be able to resume its engagement with PEN Canada’s Indigenous Literary Committee.

Writers in Exile

The Writers in the Exile committee's monthly meetings have continued, virtually, throughout the last year. We use them to share ideas, encouragement and tips on the journey of life and writing. We have set up coaching and mentorship groups to help new members overcome the language barriers they face in Canada. These have been run by volunteers affiliated with Romero House and PEN Canada.

Romero House has provided twenty eight volunteers who offer English tuition for thirteen members of our group. Some meet weekly for two hours and some meet twice a week, depending on their schedules. The coaches work on both spoken and written English. The feedback from both parties has been positive: the arrangement not only helps our members with their language skills but lets them maintain friendships and connection.

Four of our volunteers are members of PEN Canada. These offer more specific guidance with respect to writing. The two members of our group who have been matched with these coaches were thrilled to have the mentorship and enjoy their virtual weekly meetings.

In early 2021 we started a monthly storytelling workshop which is run by an experienced screenwriter. Ten members of the group attend the workshop and get feedback on their work from other participants. At the end of each session the moderator also shares constructive suggestions.

We also have a book project underway. The proposal is to publish the work of ten refugee journalists, each from a different country that currently oppresses its journalists. Each writer will submit pieces of approximately 2,500 words detailing their experience of censorship, either as fiction, memoir, essay, or chapter from a longer book.

Aaron Berhane
Chair, Writers in Exile Committee

WE HAVE A BOOK
PROJECT TO
PUBLISH THE WORK
OF TEN REFUGEE
JOURNALISTS
FROM COUNTRIES
THAT OPPRESS
JOURNALISTS. EACH
WRITER WILL SUBMIT
FICTION, A MEMOIR,
AN ESSAY, OR A
CHAPTER FROM A
LONGER BOOK.

HONORARY

ERITREA

In September 2001, thirteen journalists were arrested when President Afeworki closed Eritrea's independent newspapers. PEN Canada adopted the following as Honorary Members: **Yusuf Mohamed Ali** (editor-in-chief of *Tsigenay*), **Mattewos Habteab** (editor-in-chief of *Meqaleh*), **Dawit Habtemichael** (reporter for *Meqaleh*), **Medhanie Haile** (editor-in-chief of *Keste Debena*), **Emanuel Asrat** (editor of *Zemen*), **Temesken Ghebreyesus** (reporter for *Keste Debena*), **Dawit Isaac** (writer and co-owner of *Setit*), **Fesshaye Yohannes** "Joshua" (playwright, poet and publisher of *Setit*); **Said Abdelkader** (writer, editor of *Admas*) and **Seyoum Tsehaye**, a TV and radio journalist who wrote a weekly column for *Setit*. In 2007, reports indicated that four of the journalists—Abdelkader, Haile, Ali and Yohannes—had died in custody due to harsh conditions and a lack of medical attention. Yohannes was reportedly tortured prior to his death. In May 2007, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights deemed the detentions arbitrary and unlawful and called on Eritrea release the journalists and pay them compensation. Dawit Isaac, who spent a number of years in Sweden during the Eritrean war of independence, holds Swedish citizenship. In a 2009 TV interview President Afeworki said he did not know what crime Isaac had committed and added that Eritrean authorities would soon release him or put him on trial. A year later a senior adviser to the

president said that Isaac was being held for his involvement in a "conspiracy" by a group of Eritreans "to facilitate" an invasion by Ethiopia during the border war. He declined to provide assurances that Isaac was still alive. None of the journalists has yet been charged or tried for their alleged crimes.

MEXICO

José Armando Rodríguez Carreón was a veteran crime reporter for *El Diario*, a daily newspaper based in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua state. He was shot at least eight times by an unidentified person on the morning of November 13, 2008, as he was about to drive his daughter to school. José had covered drug-related violence and organized crime in Ciudad Juárez and, after receiving death threats, had briefly left Mexico to live in El Paso, Texas. On his return, he refused to stop covering crime stories despite receiving further death threats. Shortly before his death, Rodríguez told the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ): "The risks here are high and rising, and journalists are easy targets. But I can't live in my house like a prisoner. I refuse to live in fear." In the weeks after his murder, several other *El Diario* journalists received death threats, as did other media in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua. Two prosecutors in charge of investigating the case have reportedly been assassinated. On May 26, 2011, the Inter American Press Association sent a letter to President Calderón, signed by hundreds of newspaper readers throughout the Americas, calling on him

MEXICO

MEMBERS

to intervene in order to ensure that the stalled investigation into José's murder moves forward and those responsible are brought to justice. There has been no progress on the case since then.

SAUDI ARABIA

Blogger **Raif Badawi** was arrested on June 17, 2012 in Jeddah after organizing a conference to mark a “day of liberalism.” The event was banned and his online forum – created to foster political and social debate in Saudi Arabia – was closed by a court order. On May 7, 2014, Jeddah's Criminal Court sentenced Badawi to ten years in prison, one thousand lashes and a fine of 1 million Saudi riyals (CAD \$291,700) on charges of “founding a liberal website,” “adopting liberal thought,” and “insulting Islam.” When Badawi appeared in court to collect a written account of the verdict on May 28, 2014, he discovered the insertion of two additional penalties: a ten-year travel ban and 10-year ban from participating in visual, electronic, and written media following his release. Badawi received fifty lashes in January 2015 but has not been subjected to further corporal punishment since. Badawi was awarded PEN Canada's One Humanity prize in 2014.

Saudi Arabian-born Palestinian poet, artist, curator, **Ashraf Fayadh**, was arrested in August 2013, accused of “misguided and misleading thoughts” after the Saudi Arabian Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice received a complaint about him.

According to reports, the complaint contended that Fayadh had made obscene comments about God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Saudi Arabian state. Released on bail, he was rearrested on 1 January 2014 on charges including ‘insulting the divine self’ and having long hair. He has been held in a prison in the city of Abha ever since. According to court documents seen by PEN International, during his trial held over six hearings between February and May 2014, Fayadh stood accused of numerous “insulting the divine self and the prophet Mohammed,” “spreading atheism,” “refuting the Qur’an,” and ‘insulting the King and the Kingdom,’ among other charges. Evidence compiled against him included at least ten pages from his collection of poetry *Instructions Within*, published by the Beirut-based Dar al-Farabi in 2008 and later banned from distribution in Saudi Arabia. On 17 November 2015, the General Court of Abha sentenced Fayadh to death for the crime of being an infidel (*kufi*) following a retrial. The court argued that Fayadh's repentance for the crime of apostasy was a matter of the heart and should have no bearing whether or not the crime had been committed. Fayadh appealed the sentence. In February 2016, a Saudi Arabian court replaced the death sentence with an eight-year prison term and eight hundred lashes. Fayadh has further appealed this conviction. Fayadh was chosen for PEN Canada's One Humanity award in 2017.

Activities 2020–2021

LITERARY

Covid restrictions disrupted PEN Canada's literary programming throughout 2020. The first lockdown prevented a patrons' salon with New Yorker staff writer Andrew Marantz and CBC's Nora Young on social media's distortion of the digital public sphere. Further restrictions led to the cancellation of a book launch and literary readings in Vancouver.

PEN maintained residencies for exiled writers at George Brown College and the Humber School for Writers. In 2020 George Brown suspended its residency due to Covid lockdowns. Maria Saba was awarded the 2020 residency at the Humber School.

In November PEN Canada co-sponsored the screening of *Nasrin*, a documentary about Nasrin Sotoudeh in collaboration with Innis College and the Critical Studies in Equity and Solidarity Program, New College, at the University of Toronto.

PEN also co-sponsored a screening at the 18th Annual Human Rights Watch Toronto Film Festival. *A La Calle* is a first-hand account of the extraordinary efforts Venezuelans have made to reclaim their democracy from the dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro.

On March 9, 2021, Massey College screened *The Cost of Freedom: Refugee Journalists in Canada*. The film chronicles the lives of three members of PEN's Writers in Exile group: Abdulrahman Matar from Syria; Luis Nájera from México and Arzu Yildiz from Turkey. The film was produced by James Cullingham, an independent filmmaker.

PEN co-sponsored the following events at Ryerson's Centre for Free Expression (CFE)

**CANADIAN AUTHORS AND BOOKS:
AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?**

February 18

Although there are many Canadian writers and genuine public interest, why is there a decline in sales and borrowing of Canadian books? What does this mean for Canada? What can be done? Join a panel of experts in the discussion of these vital issues.

Panelists:

- Drew Hayden Taylor, Canadian playwright and author
- Pilar Martinez, CEO, Edmonton Public Library
- Barb Minett, Founding co-owner, The Bookshelf
- Jim Lorimer, Publisher, James Lorimer & Co.

Moderator:

Victor Rabinovitch, Former President and CEO, Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation

Co-sponsors:

Association of Canadian Publishers, Edmonton Public Library, PEN Canada, Toronto Public Library, Vancouver Public Library

**AG-GAG LAWS & THE PUBLIC'S
RIGHT TO KNOW**

March 11

Alberta and Ontario "Ag-Gag" laws seek to prevent whistleblowers, undercover journalists, and animal advocates from reporting on animal treatment, public health threats, unsafe working conditions, and environmental offences at farms and slaughterhouses. Join a panel of experts who discuss what this may mean for press freedom and democratic rights in Canada.

Panelists:

- Robert Cribb, Investigative journalist, Toronto Star
- Jodi Lazare, Assistant Professor, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University
- Richard Moon, Distinguished University Professor and Professor of Law, University of Windsor

Moderator:

Cara Zwibel, Director, Fundamental Freedoms Program, Canadian Civil Liberties Association

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Activities 2020–2021

WHO IS “FREE” TO SPEAK OF “GENOCIDE”? PERSPECTIVES ON RECLAIMING POWER AND PLACE

May 20

When the Final report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls was published, the use of this term “genocide” triggered academic controversy, media frenzy, and strong reactions across Indian country and settler society. The authors of the Report defended their text and were supported in their word choice and rationale by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous voices. However, other commentators claimed the use of the term “genocide” was a distraction from the Report’s substance. Was this a self-defeatingly overblown accusation or a serious misuse of a term defined once and for all in the UN Convention on Genocide in 1949?

Panelists:

Cyndy Baskin, Chair, Aboriginal Education Council and Associate Professor of Social Work, Ryerson University

Len Findlay, Distinguished Professor Emeritus and founding member of the Indigenous Humanities Group, University of Saskatchewan

Lynn Lavallée, Strategic Lead, Indigenous Resurgence, Faculty of Community Services, Professor of Social Work, Ryerson University

CFE VIRTUAL FORUM SERIES: HAS OUR FEAR OF OFFENDING GONE TOO FAR?

May 28

Canadian journalist Lydia Perović argues that “the quality and quantity of punishments for expressed opinions or aesthetic choices are different than just a handful of years ago” and asks if we are moving to a future in which hate speech is seen in every disagreement and the autonomy of science and art are abandoned. How has the treatment of conflicting views changed in recent years? What does it mean for democratic discussion and practice? Join our panelists in exploring the challenges to free expression in the quest for equity and social justice.

Panelists:

Sonya Fatah, Assistant Professor, Ryerson School of Journalism

Abbas Kassam, Senior Fellow, Centre for Free Expression, and former board member, National Council of Canadian Muslims

Lydia Perović, Arts & culture journalist and author

Moderator:

Lisa Taylor, Associate Professor, Ryerson School of Journalism

Co-sponsored with PEN Canada

PLATFORMS OF DISTORTION – CAN THEY BE FIXED?

June 30

Digital platforms are perfect delivery systems for gossip and entertainment. Unfortunately they now distribute most of our news. What should we do when the structural flaws of social media distort the public sphere by incentivizing misinformation, filter bubbles, electoral interference and trolling? Join a panel that will discuss how large platforms like Facebook and Twitter have distorted newsgathering and public interest debate, and what might be done to correct this.

Panelists:

Matt Bailey, Digital Freedom Program
Director, PEN America

Brendan de Caires, Executive Director,
PEN Canada

Petra Molnar, Acting Director,
International Human Rights Program,
University of Toronto

Moderator:

James L. Turk, Director, Centre for Free
Expression, Ryerson University



IN MEMORIAM: AARON BERHANE (1969–2021)

Aaron Berhane passed away on Saturday, May 1, after being admitted to hospital earlier in the week with Covid-19. At the time, following more than fifteen years of advocacy for his jailed colleagues in Eritrea, Aaron was the current chair of PEN Canada's Writers in Exile Committee.

Aaron was the co-founder and former editor-in-chief of *Setit*, Eritrea's largest independent newspaper. In September 2001 he narrowly escaped a brutal media crackdown which jailed more than a dozen of his friends and colleagues. (Twenty years later, these journalists still languish in prison, without charges or trials; at least five have died in custody.)

Aaron came to Canada as a refugee. For seventeen years he was an active member of the PEN family: a guiding spirit for the Writers in Exile group, an indefatigable campaigner for his imprisoned colleagues, and a much-loved colleague and friend.

A native Tigringa speaker who also became fluent in Amharic, he earned

a Certificate in English Language and Literature at the University of Regina in 2003. After moving to Toronto, a year later, he earned further certification in political science and literature at the University of Toronto. In subsequent years he added professional development and teaching qualifications, and a master's degree in Immigration and Settlement Studies from Ryerson University. Following a residency at George Brown College, he joined its faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences in 2016. He was also the 2019 PEN Writer in Residence at the Humber School for Writers where he worked on a forthcoming memoir of his escape from Eritrea.

“The flow of writers in exile comes not only from Eastern Europe, but also from Africa, Asia and South America—from countries of differing strains and species of political ideologies, ones where censorship and intimidation tactics have a different quality and more insidious reach.”

In a thoughtful 2012 essay for the *Literary Review of Canada*, Aaron noted a significant shift in the patterns of exile for writers and intellectuals who sought refuge in the West. “The flow of writers in exile comes not only from Eastern Europe, but also from Africa, Asia and South America—from countries of differing strains and species of political ideologies, ones where censorship and intimidation tactics have a different quality and more insidious reach.”

The first decade of his own exile had been spent in the shadow of a regime that was always keen to “vandalize, attack and punish its critics—wherever they are.” Criticism of the Afeworki regime published in *Mefith*, the monthly newspaper that Aaron started in Toronto, often led to slashed tires, smashed windscreens and other acts of intimidation.

In that essay Aaron argued that “political asylum is an enormously generous act, but more needs to be done” if exiled writers were to make Canada their home. He called for the police to have closer liaisons with diaspora communities, so they could recognize and tackle intimidation, and for the government to help exiled writers and journalists rekindle their professional lives in Canada. Presciently, he warned that failure to create such support systems would surrender an invaluable opportunity to strengthen Canada’s “treasure of multiculturalism” and concede an undeserved victory to the dictatorial regimes “that made those men and women flee in the first place.”

In 2010 Aaron was reunited with his wife Miliete and their sons Mussie and Eiven and daughter Frieta. In an interview with the Committee to Protect Journalists he admitted that it felt like a dream, adding that “my happiness will only be fulfilled when I see the same reunions between my colleagues in jail and in exile and their loved ones.” That was typical of the man, always determined to put others ahead of himself, to shine the spotlight anywhere else than on his own extraordinary story.

As chair of the Writers in Exile committee, Aaron set up storytelling and editing workshops and kept the group animated throughout the Covid shutdowns with weekly video calls. He was a leading voice in our work to establish PEN Canada as a referral partner for the expedited stream for Human Rights Defenders that the Trudeau government set out in a 2019 mandate letter to Minister of Immigration Marco Mendicino.

As those of us who knew Aaron well try to come to terms with his loss, I take some consolation from the words of Nelson Mandela, another great fighter for democracy in Africa. “Do not judge me by my successes,” said Mandela, “judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.” By that measure, Aaron’s life and work were unqualified successes and his tenacity against such fearful odds a profound moral lesson for us all. It was an honour to know him, and my privilege to have been his friend.

Brendan de Caires
Executive Director, PEN Canada

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