

*Because Writers Speak their Minds
50 years of defending freedom of expression
Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN*

Featuring

Double Jeopardy: Women Writers in Dangerous Places

Melbourne PEN Women Writers Committee celebrates
International Women's Day 2010



Lydia Cacho



Irina
Ratushinskaya



Oodgeroo
Noonuccal



Taslima Nasrin



Philo Ikonya

'I believe the role of journalism is to be a lantern, allowing society to exercise its right to know and understand; I believe human rights are non-negotiable. As long as I live, I will continue to write and writing will keep me alive.'

Lydia Cacho

Coming events

John Ralston Saul

Freedom and Globalisation
Sunday, 23 May, 7pm, RMIT Capitol Theatre, Melbourne

An event in support of the Melbourne PEN Centre presented by the Melbourne Writers Festival,
in association with the Sydney Writers' Festival.

Tickets \$27.50 adult/\$25 concession. On sale now at www.mwf.com.au

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Treasurer	Tom Shapcott
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Membership secretary	Elsa Chng
Writers in Prison Officer	Toni Jordan
Asia and Pacific Writers Network	berni m janssen
Committee members	Cynthia Troup, Elaine Lewis, Helen Ian, Tess Lawrence

Honorary Members of Melbourne PEN

Seedy Bojang

Seedy Bojang is a journalist and writer from The Gambia. After the closure of independent newspapers in The Gambia, Seedy was briefly employed by the government-supported Gambia newspaper. His employment was terminated because he would not write articles supporting the government.

Wajeha Al Huwaider

Wajeha Al Huwaider is a writer and women's rights activist from Saudi Arabia. Wajeha has often been a lone voice for women's rights, campaigning for women to be allowed to drive cars and against their treatment as second-class citizens.

Zhang Jianhong

Zhang Jianhong, writer, playwright, poet and member of the Independent Chinese PEN Centre was imprisoned from 1989-1991 for his pro-democracy activities. Zhang was arrested on 6 September 2006 and charged with "incitement to subversion of state power" and "defaming the Chinese government". Zhang was sentenced to six years in prison and one year's deprivation of political rights on 19 March 2007.

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Contents

Melbourne PEN Reports

President's Report 5

Writers in Prison Report 6

Special Reports

Where is the Justice?

Rosa Vasseghi – a personal letter 8–10

Australian writers and China

Robert Dessaix denied visa for China Tour

Frank Moorhouse's letter of withdrawal
from China Tour 30–31

Features

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in
Dangerous Places

Melbourne PEN Women Writers Committee

Celebratory readings for International

Women's Day 12–23

Tongue, cut out, not...

Tongue-atorium, a research laboratory 24

My River's Keeper:

Artists, writers and climate change 28–29

Poetry

Mirror 11

Trying to speak 25

What she says about tongues 26

River Rain Echuca 27

Welcome new and renewing members

David Yarrow, Cecilie Hall, Mohamad Nassar, Kent McCarter, Claire Thomas, Ann Shenfield,
Ilsa Evans, Kristin Otto, Christina Ratcliffe, Alexandra Baker, Judith Armstrong

Notices

Resignation of International PEN's first Executive Officer

International PEN's first Executive Officer, Caroline McCormick, has resigned. During her five years as CEO, PEN has been in a process of change and expansion with many new regional programmes and projects. She has been an extraordinarily energetic manager of our complex world organisation with its 140 centres, five committees, its board and staff, and has lead PEN in strategic planning, governance and fundraising. It is impossible to overstate Caroline's ability to deal with a huge variety of people and problems. We will miss her. We wish her well in her new post as advisor to Britain's National Theatre on their NT: Futures redevelopment.

A letter from PEN Turkey

Dear PEN Members on our Planet,

This is to note that, as PEN Turkey, we dedicate our World Poetry Day activity, which we will celebrate at the French Cultural Centre in Istanbul, to our sister Haiti PEN Centre. We will visit the poetry of Haiti. We will also read two sonnets by Shakespeare together with their translations in Kurdish and Turkish. We always recite poems in at least two languages as a sign of our efforts against racism. So we share poems not only in Turkish but also in Armenian, Kurdish and other languages. In fact we take pride in the multicultural and multilingual composition of our club in harmony with the PEN spirit.

This year's Turkish PEN Poetry Award goes to Özdemir Ince for his poems and translations, and also for his articles in favour of secularism against the growing threat of religious fundamentalism.

Merry Poetry Day!

Best regards,

Tarik Günersel

Ex-president, PEN Turkey

A poem by Özdemir Ince (Ankara, 18 November 1980).

Bird's Eye View

What does the heart of the bird that can't fly say:
a rage, a tipsiness in space,
a mountain's voice, a line of death?

Who can endure the wing's anguish,
above the city that smells of the wind,
when the clock has stopped and all doors are shut?

All these are a memory, that's all,
dizziness, feathers with blood trickling;
dregs left to the bird from a far away song.

Translated by Talat Sait Halman (Talisman 6, (Spring 1991)



Arnold Zable

This is a special year for International PEN, marking the 50th anniversary of the Writers in Prison Committee.

The milestone will be honoured by a campaign named 'Because Writers Speak Their Minds.' Formed in 1921, International PEN has 145 centres in 104 countries across the globe. Its Writers in Prison Committee, set up in 1960 in response to the persecution of writers worldwide, has become the linchpin in PEN's work. Linking the two critical dates, 1921 and 1960, the newly elected president of International PEN, John Ralston Saul, recently said:

'International PEN was created out of the scars of World War I to bring societies back together through their literature. Constant violence against writers quickly forced us to realise that free speech and literature are one and the same thing. PEN is the foremost and oldest freedom of expression organisation in the world, and since 1960 the Writers in Prison Committee has set the standard around the world for defending not just the rights of writers, but the free speech of everyone.'

The annual case list contains the names of almost 900 persecuted writers, editors, journalists and internet writers. The name of the campaign, 'Because Writers Speak Their Minds', is taken from a 1960 speech formally proposing the Writers in Prison Committee. The first 50th anniversary mini-campaign concerns Iran, and was launched with a coalition of freedom-of-expression organisations, in mid-February. The campaign also celebrates the work of more than 50 years with 50 emblematic cases of the committee. These include those of prominent historic writers Josef Brodsky and Vaclav Havel who were harassed during the Soviet era, more recent cases such as Anna Politkovskaya, Ken Saro-Wiwa, and Salman Rushdie, and current cases such as Mexican writer Lydia Cacho and imprisoned Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo.

It was Liu Xiaobo's jailing that led Australian writer Frank Moorhouse to drop out of a writers' tour to China. He announced his decision in January, and his statement and the press release prepared by Sydney PEN is reprinted in this newsletter. Robert Dessaix, who was chosen as his replacement, was refused a visa by the Chinese authorities, ostensibly because he was HIV-positive. Judith Rodriguez's succinct statement on the affair is also reprinted.

Melbourne PEN is marking the anniversary with a series of events. The first, 'Double Jeopardy' took place on Sunday, March 14. Linked to International Women's Day, the event celebrated the writing of brave women worldwide. The program was movingly presented with biographies of and powerful readings from the works of five women writers, and staged as the first Melbourne PEN event in the newly opened Wheeler Centre for books, writing and ideas.

The centre, located in Little Lonsdale Street as part of the State library complex, is the new address of Melbourne PEN where we have a desk and various facilities available for our use. Our events at the centre are publicised in its calendar, which was one of the reasons that the Double Jeopardy performance was so well attended.

The move puts PEN at the hub of literary activity in Melbourne and provides us with direct access to the Melbourne Writers' Festival and the Victorian Writers' Centre, among other key organisations. The facilities include a boardroom, in which we held our first committee meeting for the year, an auditorium and rooms for workshops and informal gatherings.

We also welcome our new editorial team for the quarterly newsletter. We are fortunate to have Chris McKenzie as the new editor. A former director of the Victorian Writers' Centre, and a long-standing member of Melbourne PEN, Chris has a wealth of experience in the Melbourne writing community, and a passion for books and human rights. We are also fortunate to have an accredited editor and former Hansard reporter, Christina Ratcliffe, as the assistant editor. Sam Robb, as research assistant, makes up the editorial team. We thank Lini Kane for the great job she did in editing the newsletter for the past few years. Lini introduced innovative changes in format and layout, and broadened the scope of the publication.

Our next major event is scheduled for 23 May. A joint venture between the Melbourne Writers Festival and Melbourne PEN, it will feature John Ralston Saul, President of International PEN. This event offers a wonderful opportunity to publicise the 50th anniversary of the Writers in Prison project.

This newsletter presents a great overview of the full scope of our work. It includes further reports on the prison project, the Asia Pacific Writers' Network and a special feature on the Double Jeopardy event with profiles of the five 'women writers in dangerous places', selected readings of their work, and Cynthia Troup's moving introduction. We thank the presenters and all who organised it.

Writers In Prison Report



Toni Jordan

Since the end of our previous newsletter in December, Melbourne PEN has responded to Writers in Prison alerts on 14 separate occasions of 14 individual cases, and our wonderful WiP volunteers have sent another 11 letters. We've written emails, letters and faxes to Azerbaijan (2), Mexico (3), Turkey, Tunisia, Sri Lanka (2), Peru, China (2), Ethiopia and Mauritania.

Every time an email appears with 'Mexico' in the subject line, my blood runs cold. Since February 2009, eight print journalists have been murdered in Mexico, and one has disappeared. These writers are: Carlos Ortega Samper (3 May 2009, Durango state); Eliseo Barrón Hernández (25 May 2009, Durango); Martín Javier Miranda Avilés (12 July 2009, Michoacán); Ernesto Montañez Valdivia (14 July 2009, Chihuahua); Norberto Miranda Madrid (23 September 2009, Chihuahua); José Bladimir Antuna García (2 November 2009, Durango); Alberto Velázquez López (22 December 2009, Quintana Roo); and Valentín Valdés Espinosa (7/8 January 2010, Coahuila). The journalist who has disappeared is María Esther Aguilar Cansimbe (11 November 2009, Michoacán).

I can only imagine the courage required to work as a writer in Mexico. To the best of my knowledge, no arrests have been made in any of these cases.

— 8 March 2010.

Coming event

Clunes Back to Booktown on 1–2 May
Guest writers include Melbourne PEN members Arnold Zable,
Judith Rodriguez and Toni Jordan

An event in support of the Melbourne PEN Centre presented by the Melbourne Writers Festival, in association with the Sydney Writers' Festival.

John Ralston Saul

Author and President of International PEN

Freedom and Globalisation

Sunday 23 May, 7pm, RMIT Capitol Theatre, Melbourne



John Ralston Saul is a long-time champion of freedom of expression and was elected President of International PEN in October 2009. An award-winning essayist and novelist, Saul has had a growing impact on political and economic thought in many countries. Declared a 'prophet' by *TIME* magazine, his works have been translated into 22 languages in 30 countries.

In 2005 in *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World*, Saul warned that, like it or not, globalism was already collapsing and that if we did not act quickly we would be caught in a crisis and limited to emergency reactions. *The Collapse of Globalism* was re-issued in 2009 with an updated epilogue that addresses the recent financial crisis. Join John Ralston Saul as he discusses globalisation's implications for freedom, writing and reading.

This event will be moderated by the President of the Melbourne PEN Centre, Arnold Zable.

Tickets are \$27.50 adult/\$25 concession. On sale now at www.mwf.com.au.

Proudly supported by RMIT University.

Where is the Justice?

A personal letter from Rosa Vasseghi
introduced by Arnold Zable

Meeting Rosa Vasseghi in her Northcote flat several weeks ago was both an inspiration and very disturbing. On hearing her story, I was enraged at the brutality of the Iranian authorities, their crushing of difference, and cruel persecution of the Baha'i people.

Rosa arrived in Melbourne at 6.30 a.m. on 9 November 1999. She will always remember the exact time. She arrived alone. It took time to find her feet, to set a new direction after years of torture, persecution and displacement. She has been greatly assisted by Mardi Stow of the Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture. Mardi has become a trusted and loyal friend. In return, like all who come to know Rosa, Mardi has been drawn by her courage and extraordinary creativity.

Rosa is a force of nature. Each day she commits herself anew to overcoming the terrors of the night, through her creativity and by bearing witness. She is the author and illustrator of eight children's books, a painter, an organiser of musical gatherings, and is currently completing an Iranian cookbook. Last year, with the assistance of the foundation, she published her book. *Where is the Justice?: stories from behind closed doors*. As the media release about the book points out, having suffered torture and imprisonment, and incensed by the injustices she has witnessed and experienced, Rosa looked around her to see if there were other lives touched by trauma. Putting her own life at risk, she went further 'inside', in various countries around the world, and discovered untold suffering that went on behind closed doors.

She met many women and girls in prisons who had been tortured, raped, robbed of their voices and dignity. But the women she met surprised her with their strength. They went to extraordinary lengths to come together, to hope, to heal, and to change the world. In *Where is the Justice?* Rosa tells the stories of countless women and girls who were not able to tell it themselves.

Her conversation echoed the universal plea of the persecuted: 'I want people to know who we really are,' she said. 'They will know us by our language and deeds, just as the government authorities have revealed who they are by their language and deeds. I want people to know that we are a people of peace, committed absolutely to non-violence. That we have always believed in universal human rights, that we do not wish or do anyone any harm.'

I came away from the conversation baffled by the question of why the Baha'i have been subjected to so much suffering, loss of livelihood and persecution. Why have so many peaceful lives been destroyed? And why is it that so little is known about it, so few representations made on their behalf? And I came away overwhelmed by Rosa's commitment to bearing witness, and to living a creative and fulfilling life, based on service to others who suffer – despite it all.

— Arnold Zable, March 18, 2010.



Mardi Stow and Rosa Vasseghi

My name is Rosa and I am a Baha'i from Iran.

Before the revolution of 1979 my father worked in the courts. After the revolution he was asked to retire. When he had retired, the government stopped his retirement benefits. This was one way my family, and myself from childhood, were persecuted for our beliefs.

When the revolution happened in Iran most people lost their freedom. Baha'i people in particular could not work any more because of their faith. From children to adults we could not continue studying for some time because we were Baha'i or belonged to a Baha'i family. They took everything we had built for our future. As Baha'is we are taught to love all people, and for this reason we haven't lost respect for the people who did these things to us.

At the time of the revolution when the new government took power they didn't let me continue my studies or my work. In 1986 they put me in prison for some time where they physically and mentally tortured me. They said to me they would do something to me to always remember them by; and they did. They tortured and killed in front of my eyes many people I did not know, and these memories still haunt me today. My only crime was to be a Baha'i.

Three years ago (2007) they arrested my sister, Rozita Vasseghi, who was imprisoned for 27 days. Her only crime was to be a Baha'i. My mother put up her house for bail and Rozita was released from prison to await her court hearing. My sister lives with my mother. Authorities have many times been to their house and confiscated everything of my sister's: her computer, books, pictures and many other belongings. My mother is in her seventies and is having to witness this persecution.

In the first week of January 2010, in Mashhad-Iran, the authorities called Rozita and eight other Baha'is and read them their sentences. But they were not given the papers with the court decision and were told they could only copy the decisions by writing on another paper, which they did. My sister and her friends all received 5-year jail sentences and for 10 years they cannot leave the country. They had 21 days to appeal to the court. All were charged with 'teaching against the regime, taking action against national security, illegal dissemination of CDs, teaching the Baha'i faith, and insulting religious sanctities'. My sister and her friends have appealed their sentences but they don't know what is going to happen.

As you know, the Baha'i faith has been systematically persecuted for the past three decades. At this time many Baha'is in the different cities of Iran are in prison. The seven individuals who formed the national leadership of the community, known as the Friends of Iran, have recently commenced their trial after two years in prison. The purported charges against them are entirely fallacious.

Special Report

These individuals have no involvement in politics and their imprisonment is based entirely on the fact that they are Baha'is.

Personally, even after considering what has been done to me and my family, I cannot hate the persecutors. But it is difficult for me to accept their behaviour, of putting innocent people in prison and accusing them of what they never thought or, based on Baha'i principles, what they cannot have any involvement in. The purpose of the Baha'i faith is to unite all the races and peoples in the world. Baha'i faith is about world peace, the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, education for all, the elimination of prejudice . . . and it can't have any involvement with political issues.

From childhood in the Baha'i community we learn about harmony, unity and peace. We learn the concepts of acceptance, forgiveness and love, the basis of the Baha'i faith and our human values.

Why must they throw us from our homes, jobs and universities and put people in prison solely because we practise the Baha'i faith?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18, states: *Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.* Therefore, I don't understand why loving other people, following the oneness of humanity and looking for world peace is a crime.

As I have been imprisoned by Iranian authorities, and have first-hand experience of the capabilities of these people and prison conditions, I am very concerned for the welfare of the Baha'is who are now detained in Iran. I am concerned for my sister and many other people who are in prison or have received their prison order, and I seek your urgent assistance such as raising the matter in Parliament, in the media and in your organisations, by expressing concern to the Iranian Ambassador in Australia or speaking out publicly, and asking the government of Iran to drop the charges against the seven leaders and to repeal the prison sentences of the nine charged in Mashhad and allow them to be free.

With many thanks,
Rosa Vasseghi

For more information about the book *Where is the Justice?: stories from behind closed doors* please contact Mardi Stow on (+61 3) 9388 0022

Mirror

My parents were not in a camp
but running and hiding
shattered their nerves.

It caught up with me
when I became a mother.

I walked for miles
carrying my baby
in case I had to flee.

I breast fed
till I was sucked dry
in case there was a famine.

I knitted a jumper
from scraps of rough wool
in case
there was a long harsh winter.

My girls look Aryan
their ethnic traces
buried deep within
for safety's sake.

— Eva Collins

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places

Melbourne PEN Women Writers Committee celebrates the lives and works of five writers
International Women's Day 2010

The Wheeler Centre: Books, Writing, Ideas

14 March 2010



Melbourne PEN Women Writers Committee members Cynthia Troup, Judith Rodriguez, Toni Jordan, Kate Holding, Paddy O'Reilly



Kate Holden reads from the work of Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Cynthia Troup began by reading the categories of caselists produced by the International PEN Writers in Prison Committee, while urging the audience to remember other endangered women writers whose stories are not known.

Killed. Killed—Motive Unknown. Disappeared. Imprisoned. Imprisoned—Investigation. Judicial Concern. On Trial (not imprisoned). Non-custodial Sentence. In Hiding. Brief Detention. Death Threat. Other Threat or Harassment. Attacked or Ill-treated. Kidnapped. Case Closed Due to Lack of Information.

Such are the categories of caselists produced by the International PEN Writers in Prison Committee. Meticulously researched and confirmed, these lists are compiled from reports from individuals, the press and human rights groups; prisoners' families, PEN members, embassy officials, academics, lawyers and friends. Regularly updated, the caselists are topical catalogues of the ordeals and tortures inflicted upon writers, journalists and publishers around the globe, in attempts to punish their bids for freedom of expression.

The organisation that became International PEN was founded in 1921 by British writer Catherine Dawson Scott (1865–1934), and quickly identified with the values of international peace and understanding. But Dawson Scott could not have predicted the increasing need for advocacy and protest in defence of free expression that was the genesis of the Writers in Prison Committee some 40 years later. At that time, Albanian woman writer Musine Kokalari was serving her fourteenth consecutive year in prison, condemned by Tirana’s military court as a saboteur and enemy of the people for her connections to the Albanian Social-Democratic Party. So thoroughly did the Albanian Communist regime destroy evidence of her writing that Kokalari’s literary talents are now almost impossible to appreciate. PEN’s campaign on her behalf did not prevent the near-total erasure of her words from the historical record. And this tragedy—this crime—points to the continuing intractable silence about the plight of women writers ‘in dangerous places’.

The Writers in Prison Caselist for July to December 2009 is the most recent available on the International PEN website, a document of just over 100 A4 pages of small print. The half-yearly total of 694 cases includes 69 women, most of them associated with Africa and the Middle East. The reader is confronted with chilling summaries of these 69 women’s suffering, and yet with the eerie fact of women’s comparative absence from the list—at most 10 per cent of the cases. Surely this figure bears no precise relationship to the number of women whose dignity—whose lives—are currently threatened because of their commitment to using words in defence of free expression. These 69 cases were noticed and reported; today we remember also those women writers whose cases were not noticed and not reported.

The 69 names are those of real women—breathing, flesh-and-blood women of our moment: daughters, mothers and grandmothers; aunts, nieces and sisters, many of them victimised during the past year for seeking to write candidly from their observations, for seeking to express dissent by criticising prejudice, untruth, corruption and violence. They have knowingly defied censorship and flouted taboos for a cause beyond personal advantage. Whether their cause be defined or definable as specific to women, each of these women is inevitably a defender of a woman’s right to speak and act in harmony with her conscience.

There can be no indifferent listener to the words that we are reading aloud this afternoon. Whether speech, short story or poem, each text is an urgent witness to the writer’s brave determination to keep faith with language, and use it against the spectre of women’s disappearance from the forum of meaningful human action.

Especially with International Women’s Day in mind, our gathering here is a form of tribute to the writers’ courage, but also a necessary form of vigilance. The names of these women whom we actively celebrate today—Taslima Nasrin, Lydia Cacho, Philo Ikonya, Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Irina Ratushinskaya—must stand for all of those women around the world whose names have never reached a PEN caselist; whose names their families and communities have not dared to write or speak of for fear of reprisal.

— Cynthia Troup

Especially with International Women’s Day in mind, our gathering here is a form of tribute to the writers’ courage, but also a necessary form of vigilance.

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places



Lydia Cacho

When the mechanisms of state repression were used against me, I found myself in the strange position of being seen as a heroine simply for exercising—with some dignity—my right to freedom and justice.

Judith Rodriguez began the readings by speaking of the desperate and heroic situation of Mexican journalist and human rights campaigner Lydia Cacho.

Lydia Cacho was born in Mexico city in 1963. As a journalist for the cultural section of the newspaper *Novedades de Cancún*, she wrote about the prostitution of Cuban and Argentine girls in Cancun, and about the sexual abuse of minors in 2003. In early 2005, Cacho published *Los Demonios del Eden: El Poder Que Protege a la Pornografía Infantil* (*The Demons of Eden: The Power That Protects Child Pornography*), an exposé of child abuse and pornography in Cancun. Her book accuses a Cancun hotel owner, Jean Succar Kuri, of involvement in a child pornography ring. It mentions a Puebla businessman, Kamel Nacif Borge, as protecting Kuri, as well as implicating various well-known politicians. The book was based on victim testimonies and a video of Kuri filmed with a hidden camera.

In October 2005, Nacif Borge sued Cacho for criminal defamation. A few days later, Puebla state police officers forced Cacho into a van and drove her 950 miles across Mexico, reportedly ramming gun barrels into her face and taunting her for 20 hours with threats that she would be raped, drowned or murdered. Cacho was released on bail.

On 14 February 2006, the Mexico City daily *La Jornada* created a media frenzy by revealing telephone conversations between Nacif Borge and the governor of Puebla, Mario Marín before Cacho's arrest. Marín and Nacif Borge discussed jailing Cacho as a favour, and having her beaten and abused while in jail in order to silence her. In January 2007, Cacho was acquitted of defamation, but on 29 November 2007, the Supreme Court ruled that Governor Marín had no case to answer. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights advised Cacho to leave the country, offering her political asylum, legal assistance and access to international courts. Lydia Cacho has chosen to remain in Mexico.

In April 2008, the Attorney General's office issued arrest warrants for five public servants from Puebla allegedly involved in Cacho's illegal detention in 2005. These were said to be the former Attorney-General, a minister, a police commander and various officials of the criminal justice system who allegedly falsified paperwork for Cacho's arrest. However, in June 2008, a court in Quintana Roo state rejected the request on jurisdictional grounds and closed the investigation. Cacho alleges that the Attorney-General's office has altered and removed key information from her file, thus weakening her case. She remains under threat.

Melbourne PEN presents an edited version of Lydia Cacho's acceptance speech, given when she received the UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize in 2008.

This award may not protect me from death threats or from death itself. But it certainly helps to protect my written work and to enable a broader audience to know and understand the Mexican reality and the impact of the global crimes of trafficking in persons and of child pornography.

When I was tortured and imprisoned for publishing the story of a network of organised crime in child pornography and sex tourism, I was confronted with the enduring question of the meaning of life. Should I continue to practise journalism in a country controlled by 300 powerful, rich men? Was there any point to demanding justice or freedom in a country where 9 out of every 10 crimes are never solved? Was it worth risking my life for my principles? Of course the answer was... yes.

Mexico, my homeland, is a country of 104 million people, a land of great landscapes, of magnificent rivers and unending green fertile mountains. Nonetheless Mexico exports 400 thousand people every year, men and women who flee to the United States, to escape hunger, poverty and violence.

I grew up in a middle class neighbourhood in Mexico City. My mother, a feminist psychologist, took me to the slums around town and told me that those kids—kids who were just like me—had no food and no chance to get an education. In this way she prepared me to be a citizen and what is now called a human rights activist.

I was born a woman. I found in feminism a philosophy based on equality and peace. It led me to view life from a gender perspective. For years I have lived and moved between two worlds: being a feminist advocate against violence is the way I act as a citizen; being a journalist is the way I practise my profession. Every day I try to enlarge my ability to listen, to understand, to feel empathy, to question, to be truthful, to be ethical. By listening to peoples' stories I learn ways to add insight and perspective to my coverage of human tragedy and human development. And also I test—as many of my colleagues do—my ability to stay alive.

I am 45 years old, and I have spent most of my life trying to understand human nature. I've been watching the news and reading newspapers most of my life. I thought I understood the macro structures of oppression. I knew how the political system works to protect the rights of the elite, at the expense of the majority. But I was not aware what it felt like to be the subject of repression myself. When the mechanisms of state repression were used against me, I found myself in the strange position of being seen as a heroine simply for exercising—with some dignity—my right to freedom and justice. Thousands of people marched on my behalf. Most of the Mexican media covered my case for almost two years, until the powerful were finally able to buy the silence of some of them.

Millions of citizens echoed my demand for freedom of the press and for the rights of the child victims I wrote about. I stood before the Supreme Court with a heart full of hope that they would defend our constitutional right to tell the truth without being tortured or incarcerated. Many thought there was so much hard evidence in this case that there would be no room for corruption. It seemed all of Mexico was hoping for a chance to believe that change was possible.

Standing against us was a handful of well dressed lawyers in dark blue suits who defended the politicians I had accused of an unsavoury relationship with paedophiles. But this handful of men was able to lobby the majority of Supreme Court judges to dismiss my freedom-of-the-press case relating to child pornography and organised crime. And so I lost and so did my country. But here I am. I was lucky enough to elude death. We journalists tend to believe that the shock provoked by reading such stories cannot fail to unite people of good will. That is one of the reasons we keep going against all odds. We know the power of compassion. As journalists we should never become messengers of the powers that be. Nor should we surrender to fear and self censorship.

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places



Taslima Nasrin

In August 1994 Nasrin was officially charged with ‘making inflammatory statements’ in the interview, and she went into hiding before going into exile in Sweden and France.

Kate Holden spoke about and read from the work of the Bangladeshi doctor and writer, Taslima Nasrin.

Taslima Nasrin was born in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in August 1962 and graduated with a medical degree in 1984. Her poetry collection *Hunger in the Roots* was published in 1989 and was followed by the book *Banished Without and Within* in 1989.

In 1993 Nasrin’s book *Shame* was published, provoking the previously unknown group Soldiers of Islam to call for her execution. The book features a Hindu family attacked by Muslims. In May 1994, Nasrin’s situation became extreme when an Indian newspaper published an interview which quoted her as calling for revision of the Koran. This led to mass protests on the streets of Dhaka, said to have numbered 300,000 people.

In August 1994 she was officially charged with ‘making inflammatory statements’ in the interview, and she went into hiding before going into exile in Sweden and France.

In 1998 Nasrin returned briefly to Bangladesh where she faced renewed threats and was forced to leave the country again. Some of her work is now banned in Bangladesh. In 2004 she settled in Kolkata, India, but the threats continued. In March 2007 an Indian extremist group offered a reward for her beheading. She fled to New Delhi but in March 2008 was forced to leave India after renewed threats, and she now lives in Europe. Taslima Nasrin has published numerous novels, essays, poetry and memoir collections, many of which have attracted controversy for their candid descriptions of her private life.

Last night a house lizard sprang up from nowhere and landed on me. Then it squirmed along the upper part of my body. After passing my shoulder, it scaled towards my head and hid itself in the bush of my hair. From there it gawked for a couple of hours at a second lizard, and at dawn, sliding down by my ear, it ultimately squatted on my spine. The second one lay prostrate upon my right leg, about two inches below my knee. Throughout the night, neither of them budged at all. Having failed to remove them, I did what I normally do: at first I kept lying with my eyes closed. Silently I counted in reverse, from one hundred to one, copiously, though there’s no rationale behind this reverse counting.

My bed is a confounded mess of dirty clothes, used trays and bowls with leftovers of meals; notebooks for scribbling, old newspapers that have turned brown with tea stains, one or two combs with traces sticking in them; one or two stray puffed rice that have lost their crispness; scattered strips of pills and phial of potions; inkless pens etc.

For some days more than two hundred black ants, very large in size, have occupied my bed. They have girded their loins to build their new home on my bed. Gradually they’re holding full sway over me. They’re such tiny creatures. Shrivelled in fear, for days on end, I have become as tiny as the ants. I’m stunned by their demeanour. They’ve been performing dance programs in classical form on the surface of my being but not for even once have I been bitten by one of them, even by mistake. I believe they’ve taken it for granted that I also belong to them.

Perhaps I’m safer in the company of the insects than of people.

—Translated by Sujal Bhattacharya

Can't I have a homeland to call my own?

Am I so dangerous a criminal, so vicious an enemy of humanity,
 Such a traitor to my country that I can't have a homeland to call my own?
 So that my land will snatch away from the rest of my life my homeland?
 Blindly from the northern to the southern hemisphere,
 Through mountains and oceans and rows and rows of trees,
 Blindly in the heavens, in the moon, in the mists and in sunshine,
 Blindly groping through grass and creepers and shrubs, earth and mankind, I
 have gone
 Searching for my homeland.
 Once I had exhausted the world, I touched the shores
 Of my homeland to exhaust my span of life,
 Only to have the sense of security of an utterly exhausted thirsty soul
 Brutally uprooted, and you throw away the little water cupped in my hand,
 And sentence me to death, what name can I have for you, land?
 You stand on my chest like an enormous mountain,
 You stamp on my throat with your legs in boots,
 You have gouged out my eyes,
 You have drawn my tongue out and snapped it into pieces,
 You have lashed and bloodied my body, broken both my legs,
 You have pulverised my toes, prised open my skull to squash my brain,
 You have arrested me, so that I die,
 Yet I call you my homeland, call you with infinite love.
 I've uttered a few home truths, hence I am a traitor to my homeland.
 I'm a traitor because you've chosen to walk shoulder to shoulder with liars in
 procession.
 You've warned me with raised fingers to give a damn to humanity,
 And whatever else I may have or not, I can't have a homeland to call my own.
 My land, you dug into my heart and hacked out of my life my own homeland.

— Nasrin wrote her first poems, some translated by Samik Bandopadhyaya, while in
 hiding in Delhi from 22 November 2007 to 19 March 2008.

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places



Philo Ikonya

‘The thing (the authorities) are most angry about is my voice’

Toni Jordan spoke about and read from the work of the Kenyan poet, fiction writer, human rights campaigner and President of Kenyan PEN, Philo Ikonya.

Philo Ikonya holds a master’s degree in literature from the University of Nairobi. She has written articles for journals, web magazines and blogs, often commenting on the social and political situation in Kenya. She has also written poetry and novels, and her novel *Kenya, will you marry me?* has been translated and published in several countries. She has worked as a lecturer of Spanish language at Tangaza College of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa, and as a socio-political commentator for radio and television.

Ikonya was arrested outside the Kenyan parliament on 18 February 2009 for attending a peaceful protest against hyperinflation and the rising price of maize flour during the famine then reportedly threatening 10 million Kenyans. Ikonya was released on bail late on the night of 18 February after intervention by lawyers and local campaigners and associated media coverage.

On the morning of 19 February in the High Court she was charged with ‘taking part in an unlawful assembly’ and released on bail of 10,000 Kenyan shillings (about AUS \$139).

While in police custody on 18 February, on the way to the central police station in Nairobi, Ikonya had been severely assaulted. A police officer had grabbed her near her breasts, ripping her clothes and threatening to kill her. Following her release on bail Ikonya was taken directly to Nairobi Women’s Hospital for treatment to considerable bruising of her neck, chin and underarm area and left hand. She was also suffering from anxiety related to her experience in custody. She was discharged on 21 February and has made a good recovery from her physical injuries.

Ikonya’s three attempts to lodge a complaint against the police officer who assaulted her have been denied. The first time, on the night of the arrest, the officers at the police station reportedly removed the complaints book, telling her to approach the Commissioner of Police directly. Ikonya has been involved in a number of protests and political readings recently and believes that the arrest and assault were related to her outspokenness on political matters.

‘The thing (the authorities) are most angry about is my voice,’ she says. Philo Ikonya can no longer work or live in Kenya.

Still sings the nightbird

The sun had travelled on in the late afternoon. For a few cloudy minutes neither the light of sun or moon were visible. But later in the evening, the moon had risen softly in the horizon. Some people somewhere far away in the basin of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya, had time to watch the stars. They were discovering Kenya. But Wakabi and Kabi worked faster to race against darkness where it falls like a curtain dividing day time from night time at 6 in the morning and again at 6 in the evening. The two hurried to leave before complete darkness fell. Luckily for them, the moon was bright this night. The powerful moon rays at moonrise were almost like the sun shining softly.

But soon they would be enveloped in the soft semi-darkness of early evening that transits fast into darkness and to the happenings of unknown things of the night. Somewhere in the distance, and somewhere near, there were other women who could not move without pain. So Kabi and her mother were lucky. It is difficult to have pain in your back and move. It is difficult to have pain in the mind and move. It is difficult to have pain in the body and continue living with zest. It is more difficult if the pain has been inflicted on you and excused by tradition.

But sometimes, out of nowhere a song bursts out of nature as if to reveal how well choreographed the concert of nature and life is. It hits the air which gives it room to unfold, happily dancing on an evening on thin and cracking air. Sometimes, this song comes into our ears, never filling them but entering in and finding its way into the heart, soul and mind. We talk about it with a smile when we are grown up and imitate it with a laugh. When we are small we might just whistle the sound back not knowing that the song has invaded us for life until we are much older. Now the song of the nightjar is heard in many places of the world. Some of us give some meaning to it, some of us do not, and others hear it with joy and others do not even notice it.

That night the nightbird song was determined and full of energy. Some people would say it was as if the bird were hitting the ground with its dainty feet, dancing as she looked in all directions: ‘La, la, la, la, la , la la, la, laaaaa!’ Now, the first three notes went straight out, the next ones flexed in and out, the last two stretched out, like this, ‘La, la, la, la, la , la la, la, laaaaa!’

The song without words tore through the quiet of the evening like many songs. It seemed to ask the listener to listen, look for and ask for the meaning of its message. Kabi was confused because the song suggested it was held in a shell of sadness that seemed to be full of hope inside, like the shell that houses a nutritious fish of the sea, making it hard to find and yet rewarding to do so. Kabi could not ignore this song any more.

‘Mother, I wonder why that bird sings at night? What bird is it?’ asked Kabi. Her mother was silent. Before she could answer, Kabi asked again. ‘What bird is that, Mother?’

Kabi walked confidently slightly behind her mother, carrying a big bundle strapped to her head and lying just above the small of her back. Her mother carried a lot more than any eye could see.

Kabi always spoke a lot even when she was tired. She loved being listened to by her mother. Sometimes she felt as if her mother was her big sister, because she was the first born. Her mother was very tired and took some time to respond.

‘It is a bird that sings at night. It sings during the day too, but it is harder to hear it,’ she said. ‘These birds sing in the bushes and forests where people have not cut all the trees and bushes. You know birds need nature as we too need our homes. If you spoil it they go away, they become fewer; they can even disappear!’

Wakabi did not just sound like a teacher. She was a teacher in a respected primary school in the village.

‘Do you think birds say something in their songs? This bird’s song disturbs me. It says something sad, yet beautiful. What do you think it says in its song, Mother?’ Kabi asked again.

‘In our language, they had put its song into a question about feeling cold. “Kwīhehoĩ, kwī heho ngūkoma kū?” meaning “Oh, it’s so cold; where shall I sleep?”’

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places



Oodgeroo Noonuccal

If you see where it is wrong and it needs changing, well do your best to change. Don't be surprised if you do not see change overnight, but try and change it.

Kate Holden talked about the life and work of Australian poet, political activist, artist and educator Oodgeroo Noonuccal.

Oodgeroo Noonuccal MBE was born Kathleen Ruska in 1920 on Stradbroke Island, and died in 1993. She was known for most of her life as Kath Walker, but in 1988, the year of Australia's bicentenary celebrations, she resumed her traditional name of Oodgeroo and returned her MBE in protest at the living conditions of her people.

Oodgeroo shared with her father the Dreaming totem of the carpet snake (Kabul) and her father's sense of injustice. Oodgeroo left school at 13 and worked as a domestic servant until 1939, when she volunteered to serve in the Australian Women's Army Service. Between 1961 and 1970, Oodgeroo achieved national prominence not only as the Queensland State Secretary of the Council for the Advancement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (CAATSI), but through her highly popular poetry and writing.

With her 1964 collection of verse *We Are Going*, Oodgeroo became the first published Aboriginal woman. *We Are Going* sold out in three days, rivalling the 1916 record for a publication of Australian verse, set by C. J. Dennis with his *Moods of Ginger Mick*.

Her second volume of poems was *The Dream Is at Hand* (1966). *My People* (1970) represented verse from the earlier editions as well as new poems, short stories, essays and speeches. *Stradbroke Dreamtime* was published in 1972. Oodgeroo also wrote a number of children's books: *Father Sky and Mother Earth* (1981), *Little Fella* (1986), and *The Rainbow Serpent* (1988) with her son Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Vivian). Oodgeroo was involved with many Aboriginal rights organisations, such as the National Tribal Council, the Aboriginal Arts Board, the Aboriginal Housing Committee, and the Queensland Aboriginal Advancement League. Oodgeroo spent her last days on Stradbroke Island where she established a cultural and environmental education centre known as Moongalba (resting-place).

We Are Going

They came in to the little town
 A semi-naked band subdued and silent
 All that remained of their tribe.
 They came here to the place of their old bora ground
 Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
 Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
 Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
 'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.
 We belong here, we are of the old ways.
 We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
 We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
 We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
 We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires.
 We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill Quick and terrible,
 And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow.
 We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
 We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
 We are nature and the past, all the old ways
 Gone now and scattered.
 The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
 The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
 The bora ring is gone.
 The corroboree is gone.
 And we are going.

Two verses from Son of Mine (1960)

I could tell you of heartbreak, hatred blind,
 I could tell you of crimes that shame mankind,
 Of brutal wrong and deeds malign,
 Of rape and murder, son of mine;

But I'll tell instead of brave and fine
 When lives of black and white entwine
 And men in brotherhood combine—
 This I would tell you, son of mine.

Understand Old One

What if you came back now
 To our new world, the city roaring
 There on the old peaceful camping place
 Of your red fires along the quiet water,
 How you would wonder
 At towering stone gunyas high in air
 Immense, incredible;
 Planes in the sky over, swarms of cars
 Like things frantic in flight.

Double Jeopardy — Women Writers in Dangerous Places



Irina Ratushinskaya

During Ratushinskaya's incarceration she continued to compose poems, famously writing verses on bars of soap.

Paddy O'Reilly, the final reader, introduced the life and work of the Russian writer, poet and dissident Irina Ratushinskaya.

Irina Ratushinskaya was born in Odessa, Ukraine, in 1954. In her teens she began to write poems, but was told by an 'official' writer that to succeed she would have to write for the regime. She graduated from the University of Odessa with a master's degree in physics in 1976 and went on to teach primary education.

In 1980 Ratushinskaya and her husband, Igor Gerashchenko, applied for permission to leave the Soviet Union. The request was refused and the couple became involved in the human rights movement. Irina's poetry was distributed in the underground press and the following year after taking part in a human rights demonstration in Pushkin Square in Moscow, she served 10 days in prison for 'hooliganism'.

Ratushinskaya was arrested again in 1982 and convicted of 'dissemination of slanderous documentation in poetic form' and sentenced to 12 years in a labour camp. During her incarceration she continued to compose poems, famously writing verses on bars of soap. Many of these poems were smuggled out of the camp and published outside the Soviet Union.

After four years in the labour camp she was released and was able to go to London where she wrote her prison memoirs, *Grey is the Colour of Hope*. She returned to Russia with her family in the late 1990s.

No 41

If you can't sleep—count up to a hundred,
 And drive these thoughts away.
 I know: I can't be reached now
 And can't be helped in any way.
 So don't tear, as you burn in a night fever,
 The white bandage of your last sleep!
 Perhaps I will soon come back again
 And then you will recognise me.
 I'll be a child or a bush
 With hands more tender there are none,
 And you must invent a story for me
 With a happy ending, and true.
 I will be grass or sand
 So I'll be warmer to embrace,
 But if I'm a hungry dog
 You must feed me.
 Like a gypsy woman I'll catch at your sleeve,
 Or hurl myself at your window like a bird,
 But don't chase me away when you recognise me.
 For I'll only have come to take a look.
 And one day in snow, or perhaps in rain
 You'll come across a frozen kitten
 And again it will be me.
 And you will be granted the power to save
 Anyone you like, in whatever trouble.
 But by that time I will be everywhere,
 everywhere on your path.

If you come out of the evening straight into the grass

If you come out of the evening straight into the grass,
 Along the cracks in the asphalt, into the twilight of the
 plants,
 Then tomorrow it will come true, and when you're awake—
 The fabulous summer of happy portents.
 All the signs are for rain,
 All the rain is for the crops,
 And all the postmen have good news.
 All the grasshoppers must sing,
 And creators must perish
 From love for those they have created, as beautiful as songs.
 And then, and then—
 The scales will fall from our eyes,
 And with enraptured vision— different from before—
 We shall read the letters that did not arrive,
 And completely
 Justify the hopes of friends who did not survive.
 And we shall raise from the ash
 Our joyful house,
 So that it may stand inspired and steadfast.
 How happy we shall be— some day later on!
 How we need to survive!
 Well, if not for ourselves— then our sweethearts.

ZhKh-385/3-4 Small Zone, 3 October 1983

*The Melbourne PEN Women Writers Committee thanks all those who attended and contributed to this day.
 This feature has been written and compiled by Elaine Lewis, Cynthia Troup and Judith Buckrich.
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Tongue, cut out, not...

berni m janssen takes us on a tour of tongue-atorium, a research laboratory held in The Scullery, Abbotsford Convent, February 2010.

The tongue-atorium is a research laboratory dedicated to all things tongue. It was developed as part of a residency, 'In Habit', at the former Abbotsford Convent during 2009 and presented in February 2010. Research contributions were called for via Melbourne PEN, the Asia and Pacific Writers' Network, PEN Centres in the region and other assorted networks. Poems, sounds, images, stories, facts, oddities and objects exploring the tongue in all its dimensions were sent, stuffing The Scullery at the convent.

When the tongue is researched, you cannot avoid the physically violent act, or the metaphor, of 'cutting out the tongue'. Over and over again, throughout history and into our time, the tongue has been cut out, one way or the other. Whether it is that people have spoken out or against, collaborated, or betrayed, we know that people have had their tongues cut out for saying too much.

Early in the 20th century, a Mexican senator had his tongue cut out (and was then killed) for having spoken out against the dictatorship in his country. In 1979, in Guatemala, 16-year-old Patrocino Menchu and his compatriots had their tongues cut out, before being brutally murdered in the village square. It's a potent act. The thought tingles the tongue, sends a shudder down the throat. If you were going to speak, perhaps now you would think twice before doing so.

There have been many attempts throughout history to 'cut out the tongues', to silence and/or censor writers. They have been harassed, incarcerated, imprisoned, tortured, disappeared, murdered for what they have spoken and written. This year is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of International PEN's Writers In Prison Program, dedicated to defending freedom of speech by documenting, recording and advocating for writers across the world who dare to speak out.

To honour this anniversary, International PEN created Because Writers Speak Their Minds — 50 years of defending freedom of expression with 50 cases from those 50 years, to represent the writers it has fought for over that time. These cases can be accessed on the International PEN website. Some names are familiar — Václav Havel; Ken Saro-Wiwa; Aung San Suu Kyi; Liu Xiaobo; Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Anna Politkovskaya. Each of their stories tells us of the extraordinary and necessary courage of writers in oppressive times. They remind us why we are members of PEN. A section of the tongue-atorium was dedicated to honouring this 50th anniversary, and all writers who have had, or have been threatened with having 'their tongues cut out'.

Many people contributed to the tongue-atorium, including members of Melbourne PEN and PEN Centres in the region. Below are a few of the contributions. During the International PEN Asia and Pacific regional meeting in 2009, I recorded a poem from Dr Samay Hamed from Afghanistan PEN, here roughly translated:

*Under my wounded tongue
one hundred beautiful wasps
sing my banned silence*

Many, many, many thanks to the PEN members for their contributions and support.

— berni m janssen



Over and over again,
throughout history and into
our time, the tongue has
been cut out, one way or
the other.



Trying to speak

Tongue:
 Mouthpiece to thought, slave to articulation
 Thick with a hotcaved sleep
 Garbled by dreams of speech.

Tongue:
 Hopeless baby flesh pink
 Torn from its roots
 Flapping, wagging with borrowed words.

Tongue:
 Blunt tip of disrespect
 Stuck out and pushing
 Insult towards shame, unashamed.

Tongue:
 Mute cleft and forked
 Darting between ease and obligation
 Flicking poison into both.

Tongue:
 Barbarous, breached at birth
 Split-personalities by what it heard
 And what it spoke.

Tongue:
 Trapped between roof and jaw
 Soft and honeyed
 Slack and spineless.

Tongue:
 Groping probing
 Exploring undulating exercising
 Its right to be everywhere at once.

Tongue:
 Tied. Lost your. Cat got your. Mother.
 All that's left for you
 Is to leave your own and adopt another.

— A previously unpublished poem
 by Sampurna Chattarji from All India PEN

What she says about tongues

these words are worn
utterable like the tongues of poems
there are no confessions
we make our own quilt of guilt
paranoia is hermetic
sealed as only a mind can be
unutterable like the tongues of poets.

— Susan Hawthorne

River Rain Echuca

Sky drops dollops down, drums
rhythms on the river's smooth skin.

Surface tension stretches, skin flexes.
Fat drops tumble, dimple without piercing.

Bubbles form foam, bounce each other,
burst in fine spray. Bead curtains

swing, sodden grey sheets hang aslant,
slap with the wind. Outlines blur, blunt

edges peer through tissue. Downpour
turns deluge. Bullets pound, pit

the pewter, silver into silver, mingle
and merge. Other noise is drowned,

sound slurred: the Murray on a rainy day.

— Anne M Carson

My River's Keeper

The relationship between art and politics has always been intriguing and complex. In June 2009 at the Melbourne Festival of Ideas it once again took centre stage as a range of speakers grappled with the theme 'Artists, Writers and Climate Change'. The stand-out address was by the writer Kate Grenville.

While Grenville acknowledged the impact artists and writers can have via direct action, she focused primarily on their unique capacity to change attitudes. Officially entitled 'The Writer in a Time of Change', and renamed by Grenville 'Writers in a Time of Change-that-isn't-happening', her talk highlighted the difficulties of shifting entrenched attitudes.

Whether it's investing in water tanks or cycling rather than driving, we know what steps we should be taking to protect the environment, but somehow we often fail to take them. Grenville made a strong case that this is where artists come in: art can change attitudes—and the brain itself—in ways that logical argument can't.

She suggested that humans typically learn by experience; we 'suck it and see'. But with climate change we don't have the luxury of the time it takes to learn in this way. Fortunately, Mother Nature has provided us with an alternative way forward. Grenville used her experience of what finally made her give up smoking to illustrate this assertion.

Although she was aware of the research findings on the detrimental effects of smoking, she kept puffing. Then one day she lit up in front of

a man she fancied. 'I watched him recalibrating his idea of me. I watched his disgust and felt it as my own.' Empathy was the key — it gave her a new perspective and succeeded where scientific evidence had failed. She changed her attitude instantly and hasn't smoked since.

Grenville argued that empathy operates by creating new pathways in the brain, citing extensive neuroscientific evidence to support this proposition. In her view, artists' unique contribution to the struggle with climate change lies in their capacity to stimulate empathy which can precipitate radical, instant change in attitudes. And the more 'difficult' the art, the more effective it can be. Like the spinach we were forced to eat as children, difficult art 'gets into your vitals and turns you inside out'.

Grenville went on to quote Kafka's assertion that 'a book is an axe for the frozen sea within us' and concluded that the artist's job was to break the ice to allow new information and ideas in.

With a new poll showing climate change losing ground as a primary concern for Australians, and a major political party enshrining climate change denial in its manifesto, we desperately need people who can wield that axe with finesse, over and over again.

A few months ago, a poet friend of mine, Anne Carson, wrote *Heron Contemplates Eels*, a poem about wildlife on the Yarra River. She was inspired by a briefing tour she had taken with one of the Yarra riverkeepers, Ian Penrose, who had pointed out the unique features of 'his' river from the seat of his tinnie.

Riverkeeper is a remarkable group. Launched on New York's Hudson River in 1983, the movement now boasts 180 waterkeeper programs around the world.

From Bolivia to India, from Russia to Nepal, these volunteers see their role as two-fold — they are the chief advocates, the voices for their local waterways; and they are community educators, who encourage others to become involved.

Like all riverkeepers, Ian Penrose is passionate about his river, which has deteriorated dramatically in recent years. Melbourne was originally sited where it is because of its proximity to the splendid Yarra. Its name means waterfall, so an early surveyor, John Helder Wedge, learned from the local Wurundjeri people. But these days,

In (Grenville's) view, artists' unique contribution to the struggle with climate change lies in their capacity to stimulate empathy which can precipitate radical, instant change in attitudes.

But the riverkeepers' skills lie in logical argument, in education and the provision of information; they don't necessarily share the artists' capacity to stimulate empathy and change entrenched attitudes.

with a current flow of around 11 per cent of its natural capacity, 'waterfall' is the last word that springs to mind when you look at the Yarra.

The riverkeepers do a great job. They are involved in cleaning up debris that stormwater drains discharge into the river. They conduct regular water testing and report sources of pollution and other transgressions to the Environment Protection Authority. They lead walking tours, where participants learn about the history, the wildlife and the threats to the river. And they advocate for the Yarra wherever possible. But the riverkeepers' skills lie in logical argument, in education and the provision of information; they don't necessarily share the artists' capacity to stimulate empathy and change entrenched attitudes.

Anne came away from her day with Ian determined to lend the riverkeepers a hand. She decided to organise a fundraiser for the Yarra Riverkeeper Association to support their work in dealing with the environmental impact of climate change. With so many of her friends being poets, a poetry soirée seemed the obvious choice of event, and a tiny island in the Yarra — Herring Island — the perfect venue. She recruited a small group to assist her, including a non-poet: me.

There was no shortage of sponsors for the event, with, for example, Parks Victoria providing

the island and punt service free. The soirée was rapidly over-subscribed and many eminent local poets were keen to donate their time to read their own and other peoples' poems in support of rivers. We organisers were blown away by the level of interest, and delighted by the money raised.

Yet something unexpected happened to me that day. I had approached the soirée with, I have to admit, a somewhat pallid appreciation of rivers. I originally volunteered to help more because of my friend's enthusiasm for a worthy cause and my strong commitment to environmental politics than because I have strong feelings about our waterways. But the soirée changed all that.

Some of the poets had had an intimate long-term connection with the Yarra itself — one of them even regularly paddling its length with Melbourne's Dragons Abreast boat crew — and their poetry captured this. Others read poems of waterways that might be far away but were nevertheless close to their hearts, like Kristin Henry's *The River of Nevermind*.

As I sat in the audience letting the poetry wash over me, I became very emotional. I felt deeply affected by the

poets and the rivers they described. Memories of my own local waterway, the Merri Creek, assailed me, and I could hardly wait to get home to see how it was faring. That desire has persisted ever since.

As a poet, Anne has finely-tuned emotional receptors and a great deal of that empathy extolled by Kate Grenville. Anne was moved by Ian Penrose's passion to take action on behalf of the Yarra. The river soirée was both a successful example of artists taking direct action on climate change and, at least in my case, a demonstration of the capacity of the artistic axe to transform ice into tears.

— Sue Jackson

This article first appeared in January 2010 in newmatilda.com

Writer Robert Dessaix denied visa to attend Australian Writers' Week in China

Lunching under the Art Gallery's vine-shaded restaurant, in the summer heat of the Adelaide Festival, I saw Michelle de Kretser join Robert Dessaix at another table. Little did I know that the serpent was in the garden. The festival that showcases its citizens' arts involvement so benignly between the marquees, lunch counter and book tent was already host to an international scandal — an insult to one of our senior writers and to Australia. Michelle, shocked in solidarity with Robert, was preparing to organise a protest.

It's unsurprising to learn that Robert Dessaix, the acclaimed author of *A Mother's Disgrace*, *Corfu*, *Night Travels*, and most recently *Twilight of Love: travels with Turgenev*, had been named as one of a delegation of four Australian writers to participate in the Shanghai International Literary Festival. A program of eight days of various public speaking engagements was to follow.

Except that — even after he'd been assured that HIV-positive status would not be a problem, and had therefore filled out forms answering questions frankly — China had denied him a visa.

China wasn't commenting. Nor was Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Though someone told him yes, health status was the alleged reason.

You may say, right, home he goes to Tasmania. More time for writing. Pity about the Literary Festival credits. But what does this do, exactly, to a man who has not just survived a pandemic scourge of our times, but has faced down varieties of prejudice? What does it say about our country's relationship with China, that, having invited Australia to select and send writers, China feels free to lie to one of them, to pretend a civilised attitude which it then reneges on, to shut its door in his face?

Perhaps it's just to show our government that it can. Perhaps the scenario is complicated by the withdrawal of writer Frank Moorhouse in protest against the detention

This is a case of literature, which should know no borders (see the PEN Charter), definitely being barred its free passage.

and sentencing of the supporters of Charter 08; Dessaix replaced him and was vulnerable. Or perhaps, in ensuring that Dessaix's life and writing should not make part of the festival discussion — and his life experience is part of his writerly self, an essential part of what he has to give — it was decided to administer an obvious rebuff. No discreet acknowledgment of an official prejudice; officially there's no prejudice. And why prevent the writer from even applying for a visa? Instead, give it legs to run with: lure him on then toss him back, all with a simple visa denial, hardly even a public act.

Dessaix has said he feels humiliated, for himself and for Australia.

This is a case of literature, which should know no borders (see the PEN Charter), definitely being barred its free passage.

Ordinary visiting tourists do not represent their country in the direct way that diplomats do: awarded honours to do honour to their country, and if slighted, conveying that insult directly and without any doubt as an insult to their country. But a delegation of artists, funded by their country, to present their work as part of national culture and achievement, they are positioned so that a rebuff is a message.

There's a message in the silence of Foreign Affairs, too. Let's hope it's no worse than the discretion behind which a weight of surprise and indignation might, no doubt diplomatically, be conveyed. And the message to Robert Dessaix? Surely discouraging.

I hope that, in solidarity with Robert Dessaix, PEN members will set their signatures to any protest that asks for them.

— Judith Rodriguez

Frank Moorhouse—Letter of withdrawal from Australian Writers' Tour of China 2010

I was invited by the Australian Ambassador to China, Dr Geoff Raby, to join a group of writers to participate in a writers' tour of China this March.

The trip would give us opportunities to read our work, speak, and visit universities during Australian Writers' Week in the cities of Beijing and Chengdu and would also include participation in the international writers' festivals in Hong Kong and Shanghai. The tour has been funded by DFAT and private sponsors.

Having at first accepted, I have now chosen to withdraw following the gaoling on Christmas Day 2009 of the Chinese writer Liu Xiaobo for 11 years, and the disappearance around this time of Liu Di, a supporter of Liu Xiaobo, which confirms that the Chinese government, against international expectations, is not moving in the direction of freedom of expression as expressed in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This seems also to be confirmed by the extension of political censorship of internet search engines and political interference with email in China.

Sydney PEN and International PEN have joined the Australian government, the European Union, the American

government, the UN and hundreds of international writers protesting Liu's Xiaobo's persecution. The Australian Embassy has frequently raised Liu's case. One of its first secretaries, together with a small number of other foreign embassy officials, attempted to observe his trial but all were refused access to the court.

I make this act of withdrawal as an individual writer, but also as a member of Sydney PEN's distinguished Writers Panel and as a recipient in 2008 of the PEN Keneally Award for my defence of freedom of expression in my essay 'The writer in a time of terror' in the Griffith Review, which also received the Alfred Deakin Award for best essay contributing to public debate and for which I was presented with a Walkley Award.

In the essay and elsewhere I argued that wide freedom of expression is increasingly accepted as possible, both within the safe order of a society, and as basic to the intellectual and aesthetic development of the individual and of the society, and that to punish people for their opinions is unjust.

I discussed the possibility of my going ahead with the visit, and using the PEN tactic of the 'empty chair' on

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stage at the events in which I would have participated in China. The empty chair symbolises a writer in gaol. The organiser of the session at a festival explains the purpose of the chair and sometimes names a writer whom it signifies.

My advice from International PEN's Asia specialists and from DFAT was that this tactic could breach Chinese law and, because of the unpredictability of the Chinese legal system, the outcome for me, for my fellow writers, and for the organisers of the event could be serious and endanger further visits to China by those involved. I have not argued for a boycott of the tour by my fellow writers.

Writers sometimes accept invitations to go into places where governments infringe basic freedoms. They do so for diverse motives: to investigate or to passively observe so as to incorporate their experiences into their future writing; sometimes they remain neutral or silent so as to further their understanding of these societies; and sometimes these visits can be justified as soft diplomacy—as a way of representing liberal values in illiberal countries through informal conversations and by the work they choose to read publicly while in that country. Sometimes, just being a writer is sufficient justification.

Because I have been vocal about freedom of expression in my own country and have been recognised for

it, it would be unseemly of me to go to China and to remain silent.

I feel that I have an unusual demand on my conscience, and have special reasons to act. It was confirmed to me by International PEN that my endorsing of PEN's protest by withdrawing from the tour would be communicated on the Chinese civil rights grapevine to those writers in prison. To this end, I have asked PEN centres here in Australia and International PEN to make my position known.

Frank Moorhouse A.M., is a novelist, short story writer and screenwriter. He has won the 2001 Miles Franklin Award (*Dark Palace*, 2000), *The Age* Book of the Year Award and the Australian Literature Society's Gold Medal (*Forty-Seventeen*, 1988). Moorhouse is a member of the Sydney PEN Centre Writers Advisory Panel. His essay, 'The writer in a time of terror', published in the *Griffith Review*, Edition 14 (2007), won the Alfred Deakin Prize for an Essay Advancing Public Debate in the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards as well as the award for Social Equity Journalism in The Walkley Awards for Excellence in Journalism.

Contributors

— Judith Raphael Buckrich

Dr Judith Buckrich, born in Budapest, Hungary was Chair of the International PEN Women Writers' Committee from 2003 to 2009, and is a Vice-President of the Melbourne Centre of PEN. Judith was working in Hungary for the English-language Daily News during the 1989 Velvet Revolution. An Honorary Research Fellow in Melbourne University's History Unit, she is the author of several significant urban histories. She has written works of fiction, is an anthologist and is currently working on a memoir.

— Anne M Carson

Anne M Carson is a Melbourne writer, poet and visual artist, and a teacher of creative writing. Her poetry has been broadcast and published in Australia and overseas. A forthcoming program on ABC Radio National's Poetica, 'Writing on the Wall', will feature Anne's work about the slave wall in Delphi, Greece.

— Eva Collins

In 1958 Eva Collins left Poland in 1958 with her family and came to Australia. She graduated from Melbourne University with a BA degree in philosophy and psychology and a Secondary Teacher's Certificate. Many years later Eva completed a Diploma of Arts in Professional Writing and Editing. As a writer and photographer she likes to capture stirring images on film and paper, revealing familiar situations in a new way.

— Susan Hawthorne

Susan Hawthorne is the author of five collections of poetry the latest of which is *Earth's Breath*. In 2009 she was an Asialink Literature Resident in Chennai, India. She is currently at work on her next collection.

— berni m janssen

berni m janssen is a writer/performer, who works collaboratively with diverse artists and communities in the development and presentation of text in multiple media. She is the web spinster and convenor of the Asia and Pacific Writers Network and a member of the Melbourne PEN Committee.

— Sue Jackson

As a family therapist, Sue Jackson is confronted daily with the anxieties and stresses that afflict modern families. To maintain her sense of hope, she regularly takes social action by writing articles about issues that concern her, like the environment and social justice. She has also written two books: *Women of Substance* (Allen & Unwin, 1998) and *The Crowded Nest* (Lothian, 2006).

— Toni Jordan

Toni Jordan's 2008 debut novel, *Addition*, was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award and longlisted for the Miles Franklin in 2009. *Addition* has been published in 16 countries worldwide. Toni lives in Melbourne where she lectures in writing at RMIT University and has a column in *The Age*. Her second novel, *Trust*, will be released in November 2010.

— Elaine Lewis

Elaine Lewis's *Left Bank Waltz: The Australian Bookshop* in Paris was published in 2006 (Random House). From 1996 to 2001 in Paris she ran The Australian Bookshop, promoting visiting Australian authors. Her English translations of poetry from France and elsewhere have been published in France and Australia. She is Deputy Editor and Book Review Editor of ISFAR's journal, *Explorations* and is a committee of Melbourne PEN, the Australian Association for Literary Translation, and the Festival Franco-Anglais de Poésie.

— Paddy O'Reilly

Paddy O'Reilly is the author of a collection of award-winning stories, *The End of the World*, a novel, *The Factory*, and a novella, *Deep Water*.

— Judith Rodriguez

Judith Rodriguez's latest title, *Manatee*, is a sampler containing recent and older poems published by Picaro Press, which has also reprinted her *Mudcrab at Gambaro's*. She is an Honorary Fellow of Deakin University, and enjoys working for PEN.

— Cynthia Troup

Cynthia Troup is a writer, historian and editor; her publications include short stories and plays, articles in Italian Studies, essays and interviews in the fields of contemporary art and music. As an editor she has specialised in Italian Studies, working on monographs and edited collections published in Australia and overseas. Recent projects include *Australians in Italy: Contemporary Lives and Impressions*, edited with Bill Kent and Ros Pesman (Monash University ePress, 2008).

— Arnold Zable

Dr Arnold Zable is a writer, educator, and human rights advocate. His books include *Jewels and Ashes*, *The Fig Tree*, *Café Scheherazade*, *Scraps of Heaven*, and most recently, *Sea of Many Returns*. Zable is the author of numerous stories, columns, features and essays and has been a visiting lecturer in creative writing at Deakin, Melbourne, Monash, RMIT, La Trobe and Victoria universities. He is president of the Melbourne Centre of International PEN and has a doctorate from the School of Creative Arts,



INTERNATIONAL PEN CHARTER

The PEN Charter is based on resolutions passed at its International Congresses. PEN affirms that:

1. Literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or 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 should at all times use what influence they have in favour of good understanding and mutual respect between nations; they pledge themselves to do their utmost to dispel race, class and national hatreds, and to champion the ideal of one humanity living in peace in one world.
4. PEN stands for the principle of unhampered transmission of thought within each nation and between all nations, and members pledge themselves to oppose any form of suppression of freedom of expression in the country and community to which they belong, as well as throughout the world wherever this is possible. PEN declares for a free press and opposes arbitrary censorship in time of peace. It believes that the necessary advance of the world towards a more highly organised political and economic order renders a free criticism of governments, administrations and institutions imperative. And since freedom implies voluntary restraint, members pledge themselves to oppose such evils of a free press as mendacious publication, deliberate falsehood and distortion of facts for political and personal ends.



MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

- I agree with the PEN charter
- I wish to become a PEN member / an associate* member

DATE.....

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

..... Postcode.....

PHONE NO Home..... Mobile.....

EMAIL (Please print).....

I enclose a cheque (no cash please) for:

- Annual Membership fee (waged) \$75
- Annual Membership fee (unwaged) \$40
- Optional donation for:

Writers in Prison \$.....

Women Writers Committee \$.....Total \$.....

*Associate members need not be published writers

ADDRESS: PO BOX 373 | FAIRFIELD | VIC 3078

PHONE: 9482 6134 after 7 p.m.

MEMBERSHIP OF PEN IS OPEN TO ALL QUALIFIED WRITERS,
EDITORS AND TRANSLATORS WHO SUBSCRIBE TO THE AIMS OF THE
INTERNATIONAL PEN CHARTER WITHOUT REGARD TO NATIONALITY,
LANGUAGE, RACE, COLOUR OR RELIGION