

Context

PEN International provides support for writers in war zones, in prisons, and at risk right around the world. This work is dependent on the funding provided through membership levies by PEN Centres such as ours. In that sense, every member of PEN Perth is helping in the global work undertaken by PEN International.

Beyond support for writers in immediate danger, our work globally, nationally and here in Boorloo/Perth, involves engaging a wider public in critical issues around what PEN International labels as 'responsible freedom of speech' and linguistic rights.

While the PEN Centres around the world have autonomy in terms of the particular campaigns they take up for purposes of advocacy or lobbying, this autonomy can, and in recent months has been part of the difficulty of such a broad based movement. Many of the Centres have suffered from internal splits along the lines of global conflicts. PEN Perth has avoided internal difficulties by following two principles (1) that we follow the lead of the Global body in terms of both campaigns and general statements, and (2) we only undertake work that the whole committee can agree on. As a result, the Perth Committee has on some issues, acted more cautiously and has followed the global PEN lead more scrupulously than some other PEN Centres, a commitment that has led to an exceptional level of harmony within the committee even on the most contentious global issues.

People

The membership of PEN Perth congratulates Caroline Wood for winning the significant and well-deserved 2024 West Australian of the Year (Culture and Arts) Award. Caroline was centrally involved in the re-establishment of the current PEN centre in Perth and served on the committee from its inception in 2018 until January this year. We are grateful to Caroline for her work on behalf of PEN and cognate organisations and movements.

Since last AGM, the total number of financial members remains more or less stable at around 35. We welcome warmly and thank the new members for their support. To those who have not renewed their membership for the coming year, we hope they will continue to engage with us through the newsletter and other non-financial means. While membership funds play a critical role in the extent to which we can support global efforts, there are many other ways in which members and fellow-travellers can support our work locally: coming to events, being informed by receiving our newsletter, following PEN Perth on the various social media platforms, and amplifying PEN's messages through your own networks.

The Committee of PEN Perth was renewed after the 2023 AGM. As indicated above long-serving and founding member of the committee, Caroline Wood announced that she would be stepping down. Two new committee members were confirmed at the 2023 AGM. As a result 2023-24 Committee was structured as follows:

Chair - Krishna Sen

Secretary - Christopher Macfarlane

Treasurer - Dan Midalia

Newsletter editor - Frances An
Writers in Prison/At-Risk coordinator and Social Media - Robin Bower
Special Projects - Baden Offord

Appeal: Compared to our sister organisations in Melbourne and Sydney, the Perth Committee is small as a proportion of membership. The committee seeks more members to join the committee and to take on structural positions (Chair, Secretary, Treasurer), to bring new regional expertise and special projects that help promote writers and writing in our part of the world.

We want to particularly encourage authors, media professionals and those with legal expertise to nominate for the committee. We are also keen to find people with diverse linguistic capability and knowledge of the Asian and Indian Ocean region.

Even if you do not see yourself as a 'committee person', please talk to us about taking up special projects to help us with membership drives, media and social media presence, fund-raising and, very importantly, letter-writing campaigns.

Campaigns

While our social media continues to work broadly on awareness-raising, publicising and amplifying PEN International campaigns in the Indo-Pacific region, since the last AGM we have had a particular focus on India and Myanmar.

Myanmar: Dr Ma Thida, dissident Burmese writer, and Chair of the PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee, addressed (via zoom) the members at the 2023 Perth AGM. Following that event (more under 'events' and 'partnerships') we worked with PEN Sydney and PEN Melbourne in supporting Ma Thida, both to provide her with platforms as well as supporting her personal situation as a writer at risk, living in Germany under a temporary visa. This campaign culminated in her visit to Australia to speak at the Writers Festivals in Brisbane, Sydney and Byron Bay and other events in Melbourne and Perth. She also appeared on a number of media, including ABC TV news, ABC Radio National LNL, and in Perth the ABC Drive program and in the Writing-WA pod-cast <https://open.substack.com/pub/writingwa/p/chair-of-pen-internationals-writers>.

India: Hany Babu, for whom we have campaigned for several years, continues to be detained without trial. We remain in touch with his wife Dr Jenny Rowena. The PEN Perth Writers in Prison coordinator, Robin Bower met with Dr Rowena late last year and the Chair, Krishna Sen met with her in January this year. We were able to offer a small financial support for Dr Rowena's advocacy on behalf of her husband and Robin's interview with her led to an article being published in the PEN Sydney magazine <https://pen.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ONLINE-VERSION-of-Design-PEN-May-2024.pdf>.

Social Media: A monthly Newsletter is sent to members and other subscribers and a variety of social media are used as tools for awareness-raising as well as specific campaigns. At the time of compiling this report our eNewsletter had 376 subscribers and Instagram and

Facebook had 751 and 405 followers respectively. We also have smaller numbers of followers on other platforms.

Donations: PEN Perth is also grateful for donations from members. We have had project specific contributions of over \$1500 in the last year. There has been substantial support from the Perth Burmese community towards hosting Ma Thida (see event details below)

Partnerships

The Centre for Stories remains the essential partner for PEN Perth and continues to provide the institutional and physical home for our activities.

The WA State Library is also an established partner supporting successive Annual Lectures, in particular through the provision of the venue. We have begun to expand our relationship to Writing WA, who regularly promote our events and there have been some on-going discussion of partnering for particular events.

PEN Perth has a productive relationship with PEN Melbourne and PEN Sydney. The 2023 PEN Perth Annual Lecture was made possible through this very important collaboration, as travel costs for the celebrated writer and activist Behrouz Boochani were shared between the three centres. This collaboration between the three centres also led to the highly successful 5-week long Australian visit by Ma Thida. PEN Sydney Magazine has commissioned a feature article about Ma Thida's Australia tour from PEN Perth as Perth was Thida's final and longest stop. A small fee for this article will be provided by PEN Sydney to PEN Perth.

Particularly in relation to PEN Sydney, the current President of PEN Sydney is nominating for a position on the PEN International Board. She is to be nominated by one of the PEN Centres in the Asian region and PEN Perth supports her bid strongly.

Ma Thida's visit to Perth was also supported by the Indo-Pacific Research Centre at Murdoch University. There may be opportunities to develop closer collaboration with Murdoch and other universities in Western Australia.

We continue to work closely with PEN International's global office in London, in particular with the Asia-Pacific coordinator, who was instrumental in putting us in touch with PEN activists in India.

PEN International has been active in seeking to diversify the age profile of the global movement. In this context, we were thrilled that the youngest member of the PEN Perth Committee, Dr Frances An was able to join 2 networking meetings: (1) PEN International's regional Civil Society Capacity Building workshop (Manila, Philippines, Oct 2023) was a collaborative workshop and discussion about Asia-Pacific issues with other Asian PEN centres. (2) World Expression Forum x PEN Norway (Norway, May, 2024) with venues across Oslo's House of Literature, Utoya island and Lillehammer, was a meeting of PEN centres across the world and other not-for-profits concerned with freedom of expression and extremism.

Events

We have had more events during this reporting period than in the previous 12 months. It is pleasing to report also that these events have been more successful in terms of audience response than any other 12 month period that the current committee can recall. All of the events were fully subscribed and most attracted small numbers of new members to the group, generated many compliments from event partners and members of the public.

Annual Lecture

The 2023 Annual PEN Perth Lecture recognising the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer, 15 November, was headlined by Behrouz Boochani and held, as in previous years, at the WA State Library Theatre. The 210 seat theatre was sold out for weeks prior to the event. The event also resulted directly in an invitation for PEN Perth to deliver a talk to the Glyde-In Community Education program.

Other Events

‘Spotlight on Palestine’ 1 March, 2024 was held as a community building event at the Centre for Stories in Northbridge. The event was organised in collaboration with the Writers’ Collective. A group of poets came together to share the words of Palestinian poets resisting erasure through decades of occupation.

Ma Thida in-conversation with award winning journalist Vicki Laurie, was held on 13 June in the beautiful Murdoch University Art Gallery. The audience included university academics and members of the Burmese community. It was a particular pleasure to be surrounded by paintings from the university’s Myanmar collection, which were displayed especially for the occasion.

A Conversation with Ma Thida: Myanmar and the Road to Freedom, was held on June 15, 2024, at the Centre for Stories. The conversation was anchored by Dr Chris Lin. A substantial section of the audience was drawn from the local Burmese community.

Events are not, of course, ends in themselves. They are a means of drawing public attention to our work and for raising funds for our causes. Equally importantly, they are about connecting writers and readers across different boundaries. We are confident that our events of 2023/24 have delivered on all of those counts.

I commend this report for approval by the membership.