



PEN Perth

Perth chapter of PEN International

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PEN Perth AGM 2026 Chair's report

Context

PEN International exists to defend freedom of expression and support writers who are imprisoned, persecuted or otherwise at risk around the world. That work depends not only on the efforts of PEN International itself but also on the support of PEN Centres such as ours. Every PEN Perth member contributes directly to that global mission through their membership and participation.

Here in Western Australia, our role is both outward and inward looking. We advocate for writers at risk, give practical expression to the values of PEN through public events and partnerships, and work to build an engaged literary community that values free expression. During 2025–26 we continued to strengthen those foundations while expanding our public profile and our collaborations with like-minded organisations.

Governance and organisational development

The Committee met regularly throughout the year, maintaining a strong level of engagement and collegiality. As always, all of the work of PEN Perth is undertaken by volunteers, whose willingness to contribute their time and expertise makes our activities possible.

The year saw several important organisational developments. Christopher Macfarlane was appointed Treasurer following Dan Midalia's decision to step back from the role after many years of exemplary service, while continuing as a co-opted committee member. The Committee also adopted a Strategic Plan and a Social Media Strategy to guide our work over the coming years, providing a clearer framework for communications, advocacy, partnerships and organisational development.

Behind the scenes, considerable work also went into strengthening our administrative systems, including improved financial processes, reviewing committee role descriptions, and beginning the transition towards a more robust digital platform for document management and committee communications.

Supporting writers at risk

Supporting writers at risk remains the heart of PEN Perth's work.

Throughout the year, the Committee continued to monitor and advocate for writers imprisoned or persecuted across our region through our Writers in Prison program. Our list of adopted writers was reviewed and updated in consultation with PEN International to ensure our advocacy remains focused where it can have the greatest impact.

Perhaps the year's most significant advocacy initiative was our support for Burmese writer and former prisoner of conscience **Ma Thida**, Chair of PEN International's Writers in Prison

Committee. PEN Perth contributed financially towards her Australian visit and worked with partners to support an extended stay in Perth.

Her visit proved exceptionally successful. It included public events at Murdoch University and Curtin University, engagement with the Myanmar community, and meetings with senior political representatives, including Julie Bishop in her United Nations role and Federal MP Sam Lim. The visit also produced two significant academic outcomes: acceptance of an expanded policy paper by Murdoch University and the publication of a jointly authored paper to the *Melbourne Asia Review*. The visit strengthened PEN Perth's international relationships and demonstrated the value of sustained collaboration between advocacy, academia and the literary community.

PEN Perth took a leading role, along with PEN International and other Australian PEN Centres in supporting Australian freelance journalist Murray Hunter during his defamation case in the Thai courts. The issues were eventually resolved.

Public events

Public events remain one of the most effective ways of bringing PEN's work before a wider audience.

Our 2025 AGM was followed by the poetry event *We Belong Here – Defiant Declarations of Presence in Spaces that Exclude*, curated by Lakshmi Kanchi. Bringing together poets from diverse backgrounds, the event reflected PEN's commitment to freedom of expression, inclusion and literary excellence.

PEN Perth also presented a successful panel titled 'Writers of conscience' during the Totally Lit Festival. These events strengthen our relationship with Western Australia's literary sector while introducing new audiences to PEN's work.

PEN Perth's collaboration with PEN International and Ubud Writers' and Readers' Festival (UWRF) has continued to gather strength. At the 2025 UWRF, for the first time there was a dedicated PEN panel including Peter Greste, Ma Thida and Ege Dundar (poet and Chair of PEN International's Young Writers' Committee), anchored by Krishna. The panel was so successful that the festival has again invited PEN to organise a similar panel at the 2026 festival.

The highlight of the public program as always, was our annual Day of the Imprisoned Writer lecture at the State Library of Western Australia featuring Peter Greste. A sold-out event, it generated significant interest across the writing and human rights communities. The evening combined Peter Greste's keynote presentation with PEN's Empty Chair tradition, highlighting the case of Jimmy Lai (Hong Kong media magnate now serving a 20-year jail term, convicted of sedition against the Chinese government). China scholar, Emeritus Professor Tim Wright spoke eloquently about Jimmy Lai's career and courage. A version of Peter Greste's talk titled 'Grey Zone: The Debate Democracies Cannot Afford to Lose', was later published in the *Guardian Australia*. The event was EMceed by Vivienne Glance and chaired by ABC journalist Kirsti Melville.

As always, the success of the event reflected the dedication of many committee members and volunteers as well as the generous support of our partners, including the State Library of Western Australia, Centre for Stories, Murdoch University and Boffins Books.

Planning has also commenced for the 2026 Day of the Imprisoned Writer event, with Louise Adler agreeing in principle to appear in conversation on issues relating to freedom of expression and writers at risk in the current political context.

Communications

Our regular newsletters, website and social media channels increasingly work together to promote events, advocate for writers at risk and engage both members and the wider community. During the year, our newsletter subscriber base grew beyond 400 readers while social media continued to record steady organic growth across LinkedIn, Bluesky and Instagram.

Rather than pursuing visibility through volume alone, the Committee adopted a communications strategy focused on thoughtful content, partnerships and meaningful engagement.

Membership

Membership remained steady throughout most of the year, with renewals continuing to provide a stable base of support for the organisation. The Committee also began reviewing ways to improve member engagement and simplify renewal processes, while exploring new opportunities to attract younger members through universities, literary events and community partnerships.

Finance

PEN Perth remains in a sound financial position.

The Committee is in discussions with the Centre for Stories regarding mechanisms that may, in future, enable tax-deductible donations to support writers at risk and related advocacy work.

Looking ahead

The past year has been one of consolidation, growth and increasing visibility. Members of the Perth committee have been increasingly active in joining PEN International's global meetings to strengthen our presence within the larger movement. We have strengthened our partnerships, expanded our communications, delivered successful public programs and continued to advocate for writers whose voices are threatened or silenced.

Much of this work has depended on collaboration – with Centre for Stories, the State Library of Western Australia, Murdoch University, Curtin University, the WA Poetry Festival, Totally Lit and many individual supporters and volunteers. We are deeply grateful for those partnerships.

Above all, I would like to thank every member of the Committee for their extraordinary commitment during the year. PEN Perth remains an entirely volunteer organisation, and the breadth of work outlined in this report reflects many hundreds of hours freely given in support of writers, freedom of expression and the values that PEN represents. A very special thanks also to Vivienne Glance and Hélène Jacomard who were acting chair and co-chair, during my absence, from May to August 2026.

Finally, thank you to our members. Your continuing support enables PEN Perth to contribute to the work of PEN International while maintaining a vibrant and active presence here in Western Australia. We look forward to building on that work in the year ahead.

Chair, PEN Perth
Krishna Sen