

# Writers oppose free speech award for Charlie Hebdo

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28 April 2015

Six American writers and novelists have withdrawn from the annual gala of the PEN American Center in protest against the organization's decision to award its Freedom of Expression Courage Award to the French satirical and anti-Muslim newspaper *Charlie Hebdo*. The newspaper's offices were the object of a terrorist attack on January 7 in which 12 people were killed and 11 more injured.

The attack was provoked by the newspaper's repeated publication of inflammatory cartoons crudely lampooning the Prophet Muhammad. While attempting to don the mantle of satire, *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons dovetailed with the policies of the French government which, along with the US, has played a leading role in the destruction of largely Muslim societies in Libya and Syria, and subjects millions of Muslim workers in France to poverty and police repression.

Writers Peter Carey, Teju Cole, Rachel Kushner, Michael Ondaatje, Francine Prose and Taiye Selasi have announced that they will not participate in the May 5 event at the American Museum of Natural History in Manhattan, where *Charlie Hebdo* editor Gerard Biard and staff member Jean-Baptiste Thoret are to receive the award as part of PEN American's week-long World Voices Festival.

Carey, an Australian, is a two-time winner of the Booker Prize for his works *Oscar and Lucinda* and *True History of the Kelly Gang*. The Sri Lankan-born Canadian national Ondaatje is also a winner of the Booker Prize for *The English Patient*. Prose is a past president of PEN American Center and a National Book Award finalist for her novel *Blue Angel*. The Nigerian-born Cole's 2002 *Open City* was the winner of several important book awards. Kushner is a two-time National Book Award finalist for her works *Telex from Cuba* and *The Flamethrowers*. A photographer

and short story writer, Selasi, also Nigerian-born, is the author of the recent acclaimed novel *Ghana Must Go*.

In addition, short-story writer Deborah Eisenberg, who won the 2011 PEN/Faulkner Award in Fiction for a compilation of her short stories, wrote a March 26 letter to PEN's Executive Director Suzanne Nossel criticizing the organization's decision. The exchange, published by Glenn Greenwald on *The Intercept*, exposes the arguments in favor of giving *Charlie Hebdo* such a prize.

Earlier this month Garry Trudeau, famous for the cartoon *Doonesbury*, criticized *Charlie Hebdo* in a speech to a Long Island University awards banquet. "By punching downward, by attacking a powerless, disenfranchised minority with crude, vulgar drawings closer to graffiti than cartoons, Charlie wandered into the realm of hate speech," he said.

Trudeau's remarks were met with condemnation from the *New York Times*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Washington Post*, among other media outlets. It is significant that the attack on Trudeau, clearly aimed at silencing criticism over the celebration of *Charlie Hebdo*, did not prevent the group of PEN American writers from publicizing their disagreement.

In her letter to Nossel, Eisenberg, like Trudeau, presents something of the context in which the cartoons appeared. "To a Muslim population in France that is already embattled, marginalized, impoverished, and victimized, in large part a devout population that clings to its religion for support, *Charlie Hebdo*'s cartoons of the Prophet must be seen as intended to cause further humiliation and suffering," she writes. If the point of bestowing the award on *Charlie Hebdo* is merely because of the provocative nature of its speech, as PEN American claims, why stop there, Eisenberg asks. "[W]hat about giving the award retroactively to Julius

Streicher's *Der Stürmer* and its satirical anti-Semitic cartoons?"

She notes that PEN American could have given its prize to Chelsea Manning, who is in prison for revealing the murderous policies of the US military in Iraq; or to Edward Snowden, who has fled the country for revealing that the Obama administration is spying on virtually all communications, in violation of the Constitution.

PEN's award choice is a political decision. The organization is solidarizing itself not only with *Charlie Hebdo*, but with the Obama administration and the various European heads of state who have seized on the terrorist attack to deepen the imperialist carve-up of the Middle East and to launch new attacks on democratic rights in the name of the "war on terror."

In light of her biography, Nossel's advocacy for *Charlie Hebdo* is no surprise. A former Obama State Department official, she is credited with coining the term "Smart Power," which was repeatedly invoked by Hillary Clinton during her time as secretary of state. In the April 4, 2004, issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Nossel described Smart Power as "a compelling vision" derived from "the great mainstay of twentieth-century U.S. foreign policy: liberal internationalism." She insisted that so-called "progressive policymakers ... should offer assertive leadership—diplomatic, economic, and not least, military—to advance a broad array of goals."

A variant of "human rights imperialism," Smart Power has proven even more murderous—and hypocritical—than its many ideological predecessors. The method is simple: accuse a targeted regime of human rights abuses; enlist NGOs, academics, the pseudo-left and the media; and then annihilate.

Nossel is not only a theorist but a practitioner. According to her entry in Wikipedia, she "played a leading role in U.S. engagement at the U.N. Human Rights Council, including the initiation of groundbreaking human rights resolutions on Iran, Syria, Libya..."

Syria and Libya, since the passage of these "human rights resolutions," have been destroyed as functioning societies. Hundreds of thousands have been killed by Islamist "freedom fighters" armed by the US, France and Britain. Millions more have been displaced, many of whom are seeking entry into Europe where they face

the toxic anti-Islamic environment cultivated by the likes of *Charlie Hebdo*.

There is the additional irony that such a figure as Nossel comes to head an organization traditionally associated with famed anti-war writers. Past presidents of PEN International, the parent organization of PEN America, include Heinrich Böll, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, Harold Pinter and Arthur Miller. While these writers were not political luminaries, they were indubitably humane, and certainly anti-militaristic.

Not so for Nossel, who has made a career of turning avowedly pacifist groups into apologists for war. Between stints in the Clinton and Obama administrations, she served as the top official at both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. Among her pet projects at the latter was the presentation of the US-led military onslaught against the Afghan population as a crusade for "gender equality"—one of her Amnesty International posters read "NATO, Keep the Progress Going!"—and championing the Russian anti-Putin punk band Pussy Riot.

The decision by important writers to protest the official embrace of *Charlie Hebdo* is a significant political event. The elevation of figures like Nossel has depended upon silence, demoralization and resignation among the artists and intellectuals they nominally represent.

These writers' public and courageous stand will be met with nervousness by the American ruling class and its media lackeys, whose operations depend upon an atmosphere of conformity and intimidation.



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