Writers oppose PEN America's right-wing stance on Gaza genocide

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16 February 2024

The past few weeks have seen writers opposing the attempts of PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) America's to maintain "neutrality" on the genocide in Gaza and its refusal to take a stand against Israel's massive crimes against the Palestinian people. PEN America is the leading writers' advocacy organization in the United States and purports to defend freedom of speech. The organization is currently headed by Suzanne Nossel, a former US government official and supporter of Zionism.

Last week over 600 writers issued an open letter to PEN America to protest its stance. The letter said in part:

> We demand PEN find the same zeal and passion that they have for banned books in the US to speak out about actual human beings in Palestine. As PEN America advances its campaigns against book banning and freedom of speech on campuses throughout the United States, the Zionist occupation forces have damaged or destroyed 372 educational facilities, including every single university and the Gaza Municipal Library, which served as a "cultural center and library for children."

The letter goes on to point out that the Israeli murder campaign has targeted

> artists, poets, and writers. They murdered poet Heba Abu Nada and kidnapped poet and writer Mosab Abu Toha. Murdering writers and bombing libraries is the ultimate book ban. Destroying universities is the ultimate repression of campus free speech. Besides that, PEN America has not extended its campaign to talk about censorship of Palestinian writers in the United States. All these struggles are crucial to this time. But when PEN only speaks out about banned books here while our tax dollars fund a genocide, it deepens its complicity.

The signatories demand "PEN wake up from its own silent, tepid, neither-here-nor-there, self-congratulatory middle of the road and take an actual stand against an actual genocide. The bare minimum."

Signatories included fiction writer and essayist Angela Flournoy, award-winning author of the novel, *The Turner House* (2016); Maaza Mengiste, Ethiopian-American author of *The Shadow King* (2019), which was shortlisted for the 2020 Booker Prize; poets Fady Joudah, Rachel McKibbens and Sarah Aziza**,** and novelists Jesmyn Ward and Téa Obreht.

On January 18, Flournoy and O. Henry Prize winner Kathleen Alcott, author of the short story collection *Emergency* (2023), cancelled their participation in PEN's "New Year, New Books" event in Los Angeles, scheduled for January 25. They took the action after learning that PEN would be co-sponsoring an event on January 31 with actress Mayim Bialik, a vocal Zionist, who, as Flournoy remarked, "has spent the past 100 days sharing dehumanizing anti-Palestinian propaganda and rallying her five million followers to the cause of the Israeli military."

In a letter to PEN America, Alcott wrote,

> If I squint [at PEN America's twitter feed] I can find perhaps two mentions of the word Palestine, one in reference to an op-ed in *Newsweek* which encourages a truly impotent and ahistorical neutrality … Meanwhile, Amy Poehler's book being banned in Florida is something PEN bangs the drum about. Fighting censorship is elemental to flourishing media and publishing industries, but it only matters if the voices protected prominently and repeatedly include those with hands at their throat.

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At the Bialik event itself in Los Angeles, members of Writers against the War in Gaza who protested, including Palestinian-American writer Randa Jarrar, were physically removed by security.

PEN America's response to criticism has been to create a web page of its statements on "The Israel-Hamas War" using the bourgeois media's terms to cover up the essential genocidal character of the Israeli actions.

In all of PEN America's material there is an attempt to equivocate and circumvent the mass murder by the Zionist state. It seeks to claim the mantle of defender of free speech while protesting, for example, the cancellation of the show at Eskenazi Museum of Art at Indiana University of Palestinian artist Samia Halaby. But it refuses anywhere to call a genocide a genocide. In its most recent statement, the organization draws an equal sign between the Palestinian raid on October 7 and the ongoing reign of terror and death in Gaza:

> The premeditated October 7 attacks on Israel targeted an open air music festival, as well as Israeli writers and artists who were murdered or taken hostage. We are devastated by and mourn these grave and ongoing losses.

The rest of the statement is ludicrous and repeats the lies of the capitalist media and the US State Department.

> We hope that the multi-national negotiations now underway will lead to a mutually agreed upon ceasefire, ending deadly airstrikes, and that a resolution can be reached that will save lives in the region, preserve rich and varied cultures, and pave the way toward a lasting peace that enables freedom and creativity for all.

This is meaningless and hypocritical blather that no one in PEN America believes, least of all the person who wrote it.

Even the image on PEN's webpage is a social lie: it shows two groups of protesters, one pro-Israeli and one pro-Palestinian, of about the same size facing off on opposite sides of a New York street. As anyone with eyes in his head knows, the pro-Zionist protests have been dwarfed by the size of the anti-genocide protests in New York City and elsewhere.

The opposition by honest writers to PEN America is entirely legitimate. PEN is exposing itself, not for the first time, as a pro-imperialist organization that stands in the way of the defense of culture and artistic freedom.

As the World Socialist Web Site has noted:

> PEN America, in fact, has been little more than the cultural arm of anti-Russian chauvinism in the US. It has held several functions in support of the war in Ukraine such as its "Voices of Ukraine: Readings in Support of Ukraine," held in Manhattan last year.
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> PEN America's Twitter feed is filled with comments such as, 'Russian forces in #Ukraine have looted tens of thousands of pieces, including avant-garde oil paintings and Scythian gold. Experts say it is the biggest art heist since the Nazis in World War II, intended to strip Ukraine of its cultural heritage.' The tweet compares the Putin regime's actions to the vandalism in the ancient city of Palmyra in Syria by ISIS in 2016 (though not the looting of the Iraq Museum under the auspices of the US military in 2003) and the bombing of Guernica in 1937 by the Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War.
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> In December [2022], [Executive Director of PEN America Center Suzanne] Nossel and other PEN America representatives traveled to Ukraine, where they met with Tetyana Teren, the Executive Director of PEN Ukraine. Teren is the former head of the government-run Ukrainian Book Institute, which calls, along with PEN Ukraine, Lviv International Book Forum, and the Book Arsenal in Kiev, for a total international ban on Russian literature.

Add to this the despicable role that PEN America played at its own World Voices Festival of International Literature in New York City in May when it capitulated to Ukrainian nationalist writers who objected to the very presence of Russian writers at the festival—by canceling the event in which the Russian writers were participating.

It is also worth noting, to give a sense of the selfishness and social backwardness of the layer that runs PEN, that Nossel was one of those upper middle-class parents in Manhattan who protested in 2021 and demanded the opening of New York City schools at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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