

PEN America in crisis as writers withdraw from World Voices Festival over Gaza genocide

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On Wednesday, PEN (Poets Essayists and Novelists) America, one of the main professional and civil rights organizations for writers in the United States, issued a conciliatory letter to the numerous writers who withdrew March 14 from the annual PEN World Voices Festival in New York City and Los Angeles, scheduled for April/May. PEN has also set up a fund of \$100,000 for Palestinian writers.

In a public letter, after a saccharine and hypocritical statement of sympathy with the victims of Israeli mass murder (“making clear our sorrow and anguish at the suffering endured by so many Palestinian civilians in Gaza”), PEN America, in the most accomplished double-talk, told writers that it was inviting “representatives of the signatories to the open letter to meet with PEN America leadership ... as a reflection of our commitment to dialogue.”

Unable to free itself of Zionist propaganda and imperialist phrase-mongering, the organization called for “an immediate ceasefire and release of the hostages, an agreement that can pave the way for urgent humanitarian access and lasting peace.”

PEN America CEO is Suzanne Nossel, a former Deputy to the US Ambassador to the UN under the late Richard Holbrooke, long-time operative for US imperialism, a former Obama administration official and a staunch pro-Zionist.

PEN is an organization in crisis, along with much of the rest of the American arts, film and literary establishment, which cannot and will not bend when it comes to opposing the physical and culture destruction of an oppressed people. PEN has suffered protest after protest from writers since October 7 for its positions, as have many other literary institutions.

In January authors Angela Flournoy and Kathleen Alcott cancelled their participation in PEN’s “New Year, New Books” event to be held later that month, over the organization’s plans to provide a platform for arch-Zionist supporter and actress Mayim Bialik. As Flournoy explained at the time, Bialik had “spent the past 100 days sharing dehumanizing anti-Palestinian propaganda and rallying her five million followers to the cause of the Israeli military.” At the Bialik event in Los Angeles in February, Palestinian-American poet Randa Jarrar was physically removed for protesting.

Last month over 600 writers, including Roxane Gay and Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah signed an open letter to PEN America demanding that “PEN ... take an actual stand against an actual genocide.”

The writers who are refusing to attend this year’s World Voices Festival include Naomi Klein, Michelle Alexander, Hisham Matar, Isabella Hammad, Maaza Mengiste, Zaina Arafat and Susan Muaddi Darraj.

In their letter to PEN, the writers noted:

Palestine’s poets, scholars, novelists and journalists and essayists have risked everything, including their lives and the lives of their families, to share their words with the world. Yet PEN America appears unwilling to stand with them firmly against the powers that have oppressed and dispossessed them for the last 75 years.

The letter continued:

We are aware that PEN America has posted a series of statements expressing concern about various incidents in Gaza. We have also followed the organization's attempts to quell a wave of criticism from hundreds of outraged writers by issuing a statement hoping for peace. While we object to the ahistoricism and false equivalencies in PEN's portrayal of the war and its causes, our overarching question is this: Where are the actions that flow from these stated concerns?

PEN America has not launched any substantial coordinated support or issued any reports highlighting the scale and scope of the attacks on writers in Gaza, or on Palestinian speech and culture more broadly.

The letter concluded by noting that PEN America had not exhibited the same reticence in campaigns about Latin America or Ukraine.

The last point is critical, and revealing. Since the US and NATO-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, PEN has adopted a stance entirely in line with that of the American ruling elite as a whole and the Biden administration in particular.

PEN America has lauded the ultra-nationalist sentiments of the Ukrainian government, infested with far-right supporters of Stepan Bandera, the World-War II Nazi collaborator and Holocaust perpetrator, and remained silent on the censoring of Russian authors and the pulping of Russian books and destruction of monuments to Pushkin and other Russian writers.

Last May, PEN capitulated to Ukrainian nationalists who refused to appear at its 2023 World Voices Festival if any Russian writers were allowed to participate in *any panel* at the festival.

With its "olive branch" letter this week, PEN, probably in consultation with the Biden administration, is attempting to cover its tracks and prevent its complete discrediting. After all, if the organization collapses or drastically loses support, what use will it be to the authorities?

The organization's call for a "ceasefire" with its pro-Palestinian critics has about as much credibility as the Biden Administration's proposal for a "ceasefire" in Gaza at the United Nations on Friday, and it serves

much the same purpose. PEN America's attempt at conciliation is a crude effort to shore up support for the Democratic Party, especially among young people, as the 2024 presidential election begins.



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