

More writers shun PEN America over genocide of Palestinians

Sandy English
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More writers have declined to participate in the writers advocacy organization PEN America's events and refused PEN's awards, or even consideration for such awards, because the organization steadfastly refuses to condemn Israel's mass murder in Gaza.

The actions follow the withdrawal last month of many writers from the annual PEN World Voices Festival in New York City and Los Angeles, scheduled for April/May. This, in turn, followed the January refusal by authors Angela Flournoy and Kathleen Alcott to participate in a PEN event in response to the organization's decision to provide a platform for arch-Zionist actress Mayim Bialik. In February, hundreds of writers signed a letter protesting PEN America's tacit support of the Gaza genocide.

According to *Literary Hub* on April 10, "esteemed translator Esther Allen, who co-founded the PEN World Voices Festival in 2005, has declined the 2024 PEN/Ralph Manheim Award for Translation."

Allen explained on Twitter/ X that she had also declined the prize in solidarity with PEN America employees whom the organization is proposing to silence through a clause in their upcoming contract:

I declined the PEN/Ralph Manheim Award for Translation, in solidarity with the 1300+ writers who've decried @PENamerica's silence on the genocidal murder of Palestinians, & with the @united_PEN fight to maintain free speech for PEN employees.

Author Camonghne Felix publicly declined her nomination on the long list for her memoir *Dyscalculia* (2024) for the PEN Jill Stein award, noting on Twitter/X:

I decided to decline this recognition and asked to be removed from the longlist in solidarity with the ongoing protest of PEN's continued normalization and denial of genocide.

Maya Binyam, also longlisted for her novel *Hangman* (2024) for the Jill Stein Award posted on Twitter/X:

I find it shameful that this recognition [of the novel] should exist under the banner of PEN America., whose leadership has been steadfast in its dismissal of the ongoing genocide, and of the historic struggle for Palestinian liberation. Calling for a ceasefire without insisting on the end of the Israeli occupation; Pledging \$100,000 to Palestinian writers while issuing statements that locate the origins of their annihilation in Hamas. These aren't olive branches. They are insults.

She continued,

I urge an immediate change in leadership. PEN America CEO, Suzanne Nossel, PEN America President Jennifer Finney Boylan, and the PEN America Executive Committee have failed to rescue public trust in the organization. Their allegiances and values have steered PEN America away from its charter and have jeopardized the safety and livelihoods of the writers they claim to represent. PEN America's leadership should be ashamed that their failures have forced these decisions onto authors whose work deserves to be celebrated.

Korean American Eugenia Leigh, whose book of poetry, *Bianca* (2024) named to the longlist for the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry, also resigned from consideration for the award, asserting on Twitter/X:

I have withdrawn from consideration for the 2024 PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry. I made this choice in keeping with the boycott sustained against [@penamerica](#), and in solidarity with Palestine.

Kelly X. Hui announced on twitter that she was turning down the PEN/Robert J. Dau Short Story Prize for Emerging Writers award for her short story, "Daughterhouse." On Twitter/X she noted:

I've just turned down the pen/dau prize, in solidarity with palestine + the protest against pen america's refusal to take a clear, principled stance on the israeli genocide against the palestinian people.

Nick Mandernach, another recipient of the PEN/Dau prize also declined the award.

In solidarity with 1300+ protesting authors I declined the PEN/DAU Prize ... There's a collective action against PEN America and we should be in lock step with Palestinian writers.

Author Ghassan Zeineddine also announced on Twitter/X that he had withdrawn his short-story collection *Dearborn*(2023) from consideration or the PEN America's Robert W. Bingham Prize for Debut Short Story Collection longlist

in solidarity with the writers who have called out PEN America's failure to speak against the daily injustices and atrocities in Gaza and the West Bank.

Translator Adrian Minckley declined PEN America's translating award for his translation of Brazilian writer Márcia Barbieri's novel *The Whore* (2023). Minckley said on Twitter/X:

I declined a @PENAmerica translation prize nomination and you should too! Down with the genocide enabling that is structural to the Art World. Long live Palestine.

The publisher of Minckley's translation, Sublunary Editions, also declined the award, noting,

This year, we (Sublunary Editions and the nominated translators) declined to participate in @PENAmerica's annual awards. We did not feel we could do so in good conscience, given their utter failure to address an ongoing genocide.

The four judges of PEN America's translation prize, Larissa Kyzer, Hanna Leliv, Parisa Saranj and Jenna Tang, issued a statement condemning the organization:

We are not, however, proud to be associated with PEN America at this time ... we cannot conscience the way an organization specifically dedicated to free speech and

freedom of expression, to the right of writers of and journalists to live and work in safety, has continuously withheld meaningful comment, has stifled dissent both within its ranks and at its events, and has attempted to sweep criticism and critique under the rug instead of participating in a good-faith dialogue about ways to meaningfully redress its wrongs and take a new path going forward.

Exhibiting its typical lack of good faith and its ability to smile insincerely and talk around the mass killing of Palestinian civilians, PEN America noted in a statement to *Literary Hub*,

We respect all those who have communicated with us, publicly and privately, about the current Gaza war, and recognize the profound stakes and pain involved. We will also continue to support writers in Gaza and the West Bank, as we explained in a recent letter to the community.

PEN America's leadership did not hire former state department official Suzanne Nossel as its CEO without reason. Not only do her connections to the capitalist state, the Democratic Party and the policy goals of American imperialism, including corraling American writers behind the program of endless war, play a significant role in her leadership, but so does the ability to talk out of both sides of her mouth in times of mounting crisis.

Nonetheless, the defection of dozens of writers from PEN America is a debacle for the organization, and a slap in the face for the Biden administration and its orbit.

The most serious, thoughtful artists have begun to break with the official policies of the museums, art galleries, universities and professional associations over the vital and decisive question of genocide and world war, one that is emerging in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and East Asia.

That opposition, however, must take on a conscious and historically informed character, one which will lead to a turn to the great social power of the international working class.



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