

PEN America cancels World Voices Festival, literary awards ceremony due to protests over its conduct on Gaza

Sandy English
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On Friday, PEN America, the largest writers advocacy organization in the US, canceled its main annual event, the World Voices Festival, scheduled for next month in New York City and Los Angeles, because of scores of withdrawals by scheduled participants over PEN's support for Israel and its murderous actions in Gaza.

The boycott began last month when several prominent authors, including Naomi Klein, Michelle Alexander, Hisham Matar and Lorrie Moore, withdrew from the festival. They issued a statement that read in part:

We have concluded that attending this year's festival would only serve to contribute to the illusion that PEN America is truly devoted to 'the defence of free speech at the center of humanity's struggle against repression' ... PEN America has declined to join other leading human rights organizations and United Nations officials in the demands for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire [in Gaza].

PEN America, in its cowardly, dishonest statement calling off the festival, smeared the writers who boycotted its events, as well as other opponents of genocide.

"We have ... heard from dozens of writers who have had to endure harsh attacks on social media and heavy demands to distance themselves from PEN America. Many expressed genuine fear to us." This is the universal response of university administrators and

others: opponents of genocide are dangerous and threatening.

PEN America complained that it has been unable to dupe writers and others into believing that the organization's silence on the Gaza genocide, its refusal to condemn Israel's targeted murder of journalists and assaults on writers, was something other than an endorsement.

"We now face a campaign that casts our struggle to reflect complexity, uphold our identity as a big tent organization, and show fealty to our principles as a moral abdication," lamented pro-Zionist CEO of PEN America, Suzanne Nossel.

While hundreds of Palestinians are being slaughtered every day in Gaza, how unfair to accuse a cultural organization that claims to defend free speech of moral abdication for its shameful acquiescence!

Again, PEN here echoes the unconvincing and trite line of the authorities, from Biden to various Democratic and Republican governors and mayors, who are beating, pepper-spraying and tasing anti-genocide campus protesters and insisting that not only are the latter antisemitic (despite the fact that many are Jewish), but that they are disturbing public order.

Last year, PEN brought disgrace on its own festival by supporting the demands of several Ukrainian nationalist writers, who insisted they would only participate if there were no Russian authors presenting in the festival *at all*.

Earlier this week, PEN also cancelled its literary awards ceremony in New York after 28 of the 61 nominees refused to be considered for awards. Altogether, over 70 writers have publicly shunned the organization, an unprecedented number.

In a statement, PEN America noted that nine of the ten nominees for the Jean Stein Book Award, given to an author for “a book-length work of any genre for its originality, merit, and impact, which has broken new ground by reshaping the boundaries of its form and signaling strong potential for lasting influence,” had withdrawn from consideration.

Israel has targeted and murdered scores of journalists, bombed libraries and other cultural sites and kidnapped writers as part of a broader mass killing of Palestinian civilians. Writers and readers have become disgusted by PEN’s refusal to condemn any of this, while at the same time continuing to claim that it speaks for the best interests and democratic rights of artists.

Many reacted with jubilation that the PEN literary awards had fallen apart. “Well done to all the nominees who took a principled stand and withdrew from the awards,” said one individual on Twitter/X. “Congratulations to everyone who withdrew,” said another. “Well done to all the writers who listened to their conscience. No business as usual!” said a third.

While PEN is in a state of severe crisis—one that could well be terminal—it continues its mission of confusing and disrupting the actual defense of free speech at the behest of the State Department and the Biden administration.

On Wednesday, PEN America issued a statement on the protests at Columbia University and elsewhere that called for “safeguarding free speech and students’ right to engage in peaceful protest,” but continued:

We also fervently condemn the antisemitic harassment and intimidation that has targeted students at Columbia and on other campuses. It is horrifying to see Jewish students targeted with hateful slurs and blatant bigotry in some instances, with many feeling unsafe on their campuses because of their religious identity.

This a foul slander against pro-Palestinian students, a fairy tale floated by the White House and its allies on the fascist right. Its repetition by PEN is of a piece with the organization’s attempts to paint Ukrainian ultranationalists—and virulent antisemites—in progressive colors and its refusal to utter the word

“genocide” in relation to Gaza.

It is significant that opposition is mounting everywhere to the official literary, academic and cultural institutions, PEN America especially.

PEN America’s staff, which has exposed management actions against free speech, protested for better working conditions last week in front of the outfit’s New York headquarters.

Former and current PEN America employees issued their own statement supporting the cancellation of the literary awards and addressing the nominees who withdrew in hope they could “work together with them to condemn the suppression of free expression and the killing of writers, including an extraordinary number of journalists, in Gaza just as elsewhere, and with as much force, outrage and impact.”

The Palestine Festival of Literature, Writers Against the War on Gaza and Amplify Palestine have organized a reading by the authors who have boycotted the PEN events. The alternative event, “Freedom to Write for Palestine,” will be held in New York City on May 7.

The conduct of PEN America, especially since its brazen support for Ukrainian nationalism and anti-Russian chauvinism in 2022, has made it clearer than ever that being a part of the American “cultural establishment” means taking orders from the pro-war, pro-genocide Biden administration and its operatives. Indeed, Nossel is one such operative, an alumna of the State Department and an acolyte of the imperialist thug Richard Holbrook. Such an organization exists not to defend, but to suppress artistic freedom.

The collapse of PEN America is a part of a shift in social and political relations. The brutal murder spree in Gaza, the bloodbath in Ukraine funded by the US and its allies, and advanced preparations for war with Iran and China are meeting with a strong popular response, including among artists.



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