

Randa Abdel-Fattah's novel, *Discipline*, launched in London

Paul Mitchell
9 October 2026

Palestinian-Australian author and academic Randa Abdel-Fattah spoke in London on October 6 about her new novel, *Discipline*, as part of a sold-out UK and Ireland tour.

Discipline draws on her experience of censorship, institutional retaliation, and the breakdown of democratic norms in Australia and internationally. Tuesday night's launch at the Trouble Club was an act of defiance against mounting repression, raising the central political question of our time: can society's deepening crises be resolved through reform, or do they require revolutionary change?

Abdel-Fattah was recently at the centre of a major free-speech controversy in Australia. In January, Adelaide Writers' Week disinvited her—the only Palestinian writer listed—citing “community cohesion” after the Bondi Beach massacre. The backlash saw 180 writers and artists withdraw, the director resign, and the event collapse.

After her UK tour was announced, the campaign against her escalated. Conservative shadow home secretary Chris Philp and the Board of Deputies of British Jews called on Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood to bar her entry to Britain, while a headline in *The Spectator* demanded, “Don't let Randa Abdel-Fattah into Britain”.

On September 4, organisers of the Cambridge Literary Festival cancelled her planned appearance after a campaign by Zionists, citing “operational issues”.

Abdel-Fattah told her audience on Tuesday, “Before Israel's genocide in Gaza my books were celebrated by the media, arts institutions and universities, which promoted my work as a symbol of diversity and gave me prominent platforms.”

She recalled, “That changed when I criticised Israel. The genocide became a dividing line: doors closed, censorship intensified, and institutional support turned into repression.”

Abdel-Fattah spoke with composure and tenderness toward the communities her book depicts.

Discipline is set in May 2021, during the last major Israeli bombardment of Gaza before October 7. Its catalyst is Nabil, a young Arab Muslim student arrested for protesting a weapons manufacturer's partnership with his university — and who, pointedly, “does not say a single word in this book.” He is the subject of headlines, speculation and defamation, but never given a voice. The narrative device delivers a structural critique of how the media and political establishment erase the voices of those targeted by state repression.

Abdel-Fattah's story follows three figures whose lives are reshaped by Nabil's arrest: Hannah, a Palestinian journalist at a national newspaper, navigating a newsroom that simultaneously exploits her “access” to the community and undermines her ability to report; her husband Jamal, a Palestinian PhD student whose family is in Gaza, who channels his panic—“every single day... is my family alive”—into trying to gather signatures for a statement of solidarity, only to be stopped by Ashraf, the Egyptian Muslim academic he most trusts; and Fayza, head of the Islamic school Nabil attends, as reporters brand it a “school of terrorists.”

Discipline is a carefully constructed novel. Abdel-Fattah's use of silence, fragmented media narratives and institutional dialogue gives the book a documentary quality without sacrificing emotional depth. The scenes between Hannah and her mother—negotiating trauma, fear and intergenerational coping—are among the most affecting. Her portrayal of Jamal's desperation, shaped by both academic precarity and Gaza's bombardment, is restrained rather than melodramatic.

Some of the book's most striking passages concern complicity. Its blurb asks, “Silence is complicity, but what does it take to speak up?”

Abdel-Fattah said that she made Jamal's antagonist a fellow Muslim, deliberately, to avoid the easy option of using a “white manager” as villain. She wanted to show

how “white supremacist institutions enrol people to do their dirty work”, with people of colour becoming “foot soldiers for that kind of racism as a survival mechanism.” She told the event, pointedly, “I’ve never ever met anybody who’s risen to the top and then brought people up with them; instead, they kicked down many people to get up there.”

Abdel-Fattah’s response to the “weaponisation of language” was one of the evening’s sharpest moments. “We are actually comparing words to bombs, comparing hurt feelings to corpses,” she said, describing a ten-month Royal Commission in which “Witness after witness was given absolute free rein to equate anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism to equate criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism to the extent that the words like ‘free Palestine’ were considered as potentially antisemitic.” She insisted, “These are not just abstract conversations. They are words that can land you in jail.”

On the myth of journalistic neutrality, Abdel-Fattah was at her most forceful. “What is the other side of [a child’s body] having more than 300 bullets?” she asked. “How can you talk of balance with children’s dismembered, decapitated bodies in plastic bags?” And on the pretence of neutrality itself: “It is as absurd as saying, I am neutral over the extermination of Jews in the Holocaust.”

There was a quiet dignity in her recalling the Adelaide Festival controversy: “It was my very presence as a Palestinian that was constructed as a threat,” she said—noting the bitter irony that festival director Louise Adler, who had invited her and who resigned over her exclusion, was herself an anti-Zionist Jewish woman whose parents survived the Holocaust.

World Socialist Web Site journalists Paul Mitchell and Jean Shaoul spoke during the Q&A.

Mitchell said the attacks on Abdel-Fattah were part of a global turn to authoritarianism aimed at suppressing opposition to war. Referring to his coverage of the Old Bailey trial of Sarah Cotte, who faced terrorism charges for a speech she gave at SOAS at the age of 19, he argued that her acquittal by a mostly white jury demonstrated the dead-end of race-based politics and the need to appeal to the working class.

Responding to Abdel-Fattah’s comments on the failure of political leaders, Labour politicians and trade union officials, Mitchell insisted, “what is needed is an international party of working people,” invoking Marx’s call for workers of all countries to unite.

Shaoul expanded on the international dimensions of the Gaza onslaught, noting how the United States, Britain,

Germany and Australia continued to arm and politically shield Israel, despite protests by millions. She argued for an international movement of working people capable of ending war and the capitalist system that produces it.

Abdel-Fattah’s answer was remarkable: “I agree that’s what we need. The genocide has proven to us that the current world order serving the billionaires is not sustainable. I am a firm believer in revolution, not reform... I don’t believe in the lesser-of-two-evils idea... We have to actually create a complete alternative. It’s the political economy; it comes back to race and class.”

Her forthright response signals a cultural shift and raises fundamental questions. Abdel-Fattah’s political outlook remains limited by concepts of identity and “positionality” that conflict with a Marxist outlook. The institutions she criticises are characterised primarily as “white supremacist” rather than capitalist. She often frames her remedy as building movements to pressure those institutions to change.

But the repression that Abdel-Fattah describes is not primarily racial, although racism is an undeniable tool. It arises from the role of universities, media organisations, and cultural institutions within capitalist society, which enforce ruling-class interests and foreign policy objectives. Such institutions cannot ultimately be reformed through moral appeals. They must be challenged through the growth of a mass working-class movement for socialism—one that will attract the most far-sighted and courageous intellectuals and artists.

Abdel-Fattah is a brave writer and personality who has paid a heavy price—a suspended research grant, exclusions, a premier comparing her to murderers—for saying what millions can see with their own eyes. As she put it, she wrote her book “for” the communities that are usually written “about.” That is no small thing.

Discipline is a literary achievement and a document of this moment in history: a record of how cultural institutions, universities and media organisations have aligned with state power to suppress opposition to genocide and war. The response to Abdel-Fattah’s UK and Ireland book tour, following events in Australia, demonstrates how this agenda of state censorship and repression is being challenged ever more openly.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact