

PEN WRITERS AT RISK: STRADDLING PRESS FREEDOMS AND ARTISTIC FREEDOMS

By Wendy Ide



Cathy McCann

Freedom of speech. For many of us, it's something to be taken for granted. A right, rather than a privilege. But for others, speaking out is a risky business. The written word can be a powerful weapon when deployed against injustice, abuses of power and social imbalances. But words alone can't defend the writers who find themselves targeted by those – individuals, organisations or governments – whose actions they call to account. That's where PEN International comes in.

Founded in 1921, in the aftermath of WWI, by British poet, playwright and peace activist Catherine Dawson-Scott, PEN is a global writers and freedom of expression organisation. It abides by a charter which states that literature knows no frontiers; that at all times, but particularly during times of conflict, writers and artists should be able to express their ideas without national or political interference or pressure. In practise, this means offering a range of emergency support to any writers who find themselves oppressed or endangered because of their words.

Cathy McCann, manager of PEN's Writers At Risk protection team, explains that the organisation has "a very broad understanding of the term writer. It can mean creative writer but also journalists, bloggers, academics. Also musicians – people who are targeted for their lyrics." PEN is unique, she explains, in that it deals with both press freedoms and artistic freedoms, effectively straddling two worlds. The mandate covers playwrights, poets, novelists, literary translators, screenwriters, publishers, cartoonists and filmmakers.

"My team is responsible for providing direct assistance for individual cases of writers at risk. That can include anything from small grants to trying to facilitate temporary relocation. The main campaigning side of the work is advocacy which is the framework within which our protection work happens. We work very closely with ICORN, the International Cities of Refuge Network (see page 21). They provide long-term temporary placements for writers and artists in need of protection who have to flee either their country or their region. Or who have already fled due to persecution. And we do all the research and verification of applications to ICORN."

PEN has been involved in the world of film most recently with the most high-profile case of Ukrainian writer and filmmaker Oleg Sentsov (see page 9). PEN members mobilised and campaigned for his release; when Sentsov was freed in September 2019, PEN co-hosted an event for him in London shortly after his release.

PEN also has recently campaigned for Turkish journalist and documentary filmmaker Can Dündar; the founder of the production company Eye for Africa, Prudence Urii; and the Iranian visual artist and filmmaker Elahe Rahroniya, all of whom are now living in exile.

The foundation of the International Coalition for Filmmakers at Risk is, agrees McCann, a positive step. "Filmmakers, particularly documentary filmmakers, frequently face persecution for their work in various parts of the world, and yet there are very few dedicated organisations to support them." She anticipates natural collaborations between PEN and the Coalition. "PEN may be able to offer support with research and verification of cases of filmmakers at risk, take part in joint advocacy, advise on good practice and share information about the Coalition with our networks."

And with the new challenges facing human rights organisations because of the pandemic, support and collaboration between like minded organisations is all the more crucial. "In the immediate," says McCann of COVID-19, "it is impacting through borders being closed. So therefore people who might have been en route to a protective placement or who need to flee can't. There are people whose source of income has dried up. We have had several requests now for emergency funding. There's also been the positive outcome in that those who have been seeking asylum, especially in western countries, have basically had their cases knocked into the long grass. The Home Office in the UK and I think in many countries are just not processing asylum applications. A little reprieve."

"But also, we are getting reports of local organisations that are facing closure because their funding has dried up. The lack of monitoring of the emergency legislation that has been brought in in many countries is very open to abuse. The shutting down of the internet: Iran and Bangladesh, for example, have been trying to restrict access to information relating to COVID."

Wendy Ide is a film critic and feature writer who works for The Observer, Screen International and Ekko, among others. She has also served as a programme advisor for several film festivals.



PEN held a 2019 event in London to honour Oleg Sentsov