

PEN Joins *ABR*

Since the beginning of 2003, nine writers and journalists have been murdered worldwide, adding to International PEN's list of 400 who have been killed over the last ten years. In the same period, 769 other writers and journalists have been imprisoned, tortured, attacked, threatened, harassed and deported, or have disappeared, gone into hiding or fled in fear of their lives — simply for practising their profession.

International PEN is a worldwide organisation of writers, consisting of 130 centres in ninety-one countries. PEN was founded in 1921 to promote friendship and cooperation among writers everywhere, regardless of their political positions. It fights for freedom of expression and opposes political censorship. Above all, it vigorously defends those writers who suffer under oppressive régimes.

Over the years, PEN's members have included eminent writers around the world, including Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Thomas Mann, Nadine Gordimer, Arthur Miller, Margaret Atwood, Thomas Keneally and David Malouf. The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa has declared: 'In times of division between countries, PEN is one of the rare institutions to keep a bridge constantly open.'

In 1960 PEN established a Writers in Prison Committee to campaign on behalf of persecuted writers worldwide. The Committee currently monitors the cases of more than 1000 writers each year, lobbying governments to secure their release. The Committee maintains contact with imprisoned writers and their families, while also working through the UN to draw attention both to individual cases and to human rights abuses in specific countries. This year so far, twenty-eight writers have been released.

The Australian centres of International PEN contribute to this effort. In the coming months, Australian PEN Centres will bring you the stories of a few of these writers, beginning with the Burmese writer Aung Myint.

When you read of these writers' plights, remember that you can make a difference, in the following ways:

- Contact your local PEN centre for further details.
Website: www.pen.org.au.
- Write to the appropriate bodies on behalf of imprisoned or persecuted writers.
- Join your local PEN centre. Membership is open to all published writers, editors and translators. Associate membership is open to others.

The former Czech Republic president and writer, Vaclav Havel, once said: 'If a single writer in a country is in chains, then there are some links of that chain that bind us all.' The freedom to read, the freedom to write, should belong to us all.

Hsu-Ming Teo