

## **Sydney PEN Award November 2008**

The Sydney PEN Award was instituted in 2006 to acknowledge outstanding work by a Sydney PEN member in support of PEN's aims.

The Award is made possible by the generosity of Sydney PEN member Jane Morgan and Charles Wolf of The Pen Shop in Sydney.

I am very pleased to tell you that we are awarding the 2008 Sydney PEN Award to writer Chip Rolley, who has been instrumental in several major initiatives that were firsts of their kind – not just for Sydney PEN, but for PEN internationally.

Chip Rolley is a freelance writer who has been published widely in Australia and overseas, most recently and regularly in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. He served as a member of the Sydney PEN Management Committee from August 2000 – May 2007. During that time he became very involved with the Writers in Detention committee that had been established to campaign for the release of writers who were among those asylum seekers held in detention under the then Howard government's policy.

Chip was one of a small group of Sydney PEN members who rallied writers and other prominent citizens to support a petition protesting the government's actions. This culminated in an advertisement in the *Weekend Australian* with the names of over 50,000 people.

Today, thankfully, our Writers in Detention Committee is defunct, as we can say that there are no writers in detention in Australia.

Chip's strong view that freedom of expression in China should be a key concern of Sydney PEN led him to work with International PEN to ensure this issue remained at the top of their agenda, and to forge links with other PEN Centres including Independent Chinese PEN, which operates in China and overseas.

In 2005, with then PEN President Nicholas Jose, Chip visited China on behalf of the International PEN Board to report on PEN activity there. From this trip emerged the idea for a conference on writing in China, which Chip was instrumental in planning and executing. He also chaired the conference, the International PEN Asia and Pacific regional conference, which was held in Hong Kong in January 2007. This was the first International PEN event ever held in China.

But it was not the first, or the last time that Chip would have a great idea and through sheer force of will, personality and creativity turn it into a reality. Perhaps Chip's finest achievement is also his most recent, and one which most of you I hope will be familiar with: the PEN Poem Relay.

It began innocently enough, when Chip was living in Shanghai in 2005 and came across a short poem of three stanzas by imprisoned journalist Shi Tao. The poem, JUNE, is a

meditation on the military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square protests in June 1989, which remains a censored topic in China. As a fluent speaker and writer of Mandarin, Chip translated the poem into English and sent it to Sydney for distribution at a PEN event, and also to Swiss-German PEN Centres, where he had contacts. People were moved by the poem, and soon there were versions in French, Italian and German.

He got the idea for a “relay” of translations of the poem, that would coincide with the Torch Relay held in the lead-up to the Olympics in Beijing. To use a poem from an imprisoned Chinese writer, to call for freedom of expression in China and the release of all 44 writers and journalists currently imprisoned in that country.

Chip coordinated with our technology partner, BarNet, over the development of a large and complex website that had to cope with multiple languages, and he coordinated with dozens of PEN centres around the world to secure translations, which came in from countries including Iraq, Afghanistan and Tibet.

The poem travelled the same route as the Olympic Torch relay, from country to country via new translations, between March and August this year. Visitors to the relay website could track the poem's progress on an interactive world map, read or listen to translations, and take action. (Chip also found time to represent Sydney PEN in Hong Kong in May this year, at the One Dream: Free Expression in China event, which was a two-day seminar and arts fair designed to coincide with the arrival of the Olympic torch there.)

Ultimately the poem was translated 127 times into 100 languages, and travelled to 65 countries, making JUNE surely one of the most widely distributed poems in history.

And on August 6, 2008, at the end of the 4.5 month-long relay, Chip and his fellow organisers presented a petition to Chinese President Hu Jintao comprising all translations of Shi Tao's poem.

Those who worked with Chip before and during the PEN Poem Relay have estimated that Chip devoted nearly six months full-time to the project.

In all his work for PEN, Chip has embodied the PEN vision - taking a strong public stand in supporting freedom of expression in Australia and the world at large, and promoting the written word in all its forms as a way to understanding and the free transmission of ideas.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great pleasure to ask Tom Keneally to present the 2008 Sydney PEN Award to Chip Rolley.