



freedom to write...  
freedom to read

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## **EMPTY CHAIR CAMPAIGN FOR AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES & COMMUNITY GROUPS 2010**

This kit provides the materials for your library, venue or group to take part in Sydney PEN Centre's Empty Chair campaign. It's an easy and effective way of getting your community involved in a national movement that promotes freedom of expression for readers and writers around the world.

### **What is PEN?**

International PEN was founded in 1921 by English novelist Amy Dawson Scott, and early members included J.M. Barrie, G.K. Chesterton, Rebecca West, Robert Frost, H.G. Wells, Joseph Conrad - even that famous non-joiner George Bernard Shaw. PEN, which stands for Poets, Essayists and Novelists, spread rapidly across the world and today has local centres throughout Asia and the South Pacific, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. It now includes journalists, playwrights, publishers, and translators as well as poets, essayists and novelists. Among its members worldwide are Margaret Atwood, Nadine Gordimer, Tom Keneally, David Malouf, Toni Morrison, Kenzaburo Oe, Salman Rushdie and Tom Stoppard. International PEN exists to emphasise the role of literature in the development of mutual understanding and world culture; to promote literature in a variety of ways, including by opposing restraints on freedom of expression and working to promote literacy itself; and to act as a powerful voice on behalf of writers harassed, imprisoned and sometimes killed for their views. International PEN is a strictly non-political non-governmental organisation, and the only writers' organisation in consultative relations with the United Nations (with Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN and in formal consultative relations with UNESCO).

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Sydney PEN was founded in 1931 by Ethel Turner, Mary Gilmore, and Dorothea Mackellar. Through our Writers in Prison Committee, we work with International PEN to defend the internationally recognised right to freedom of expression. We protest to governments around the world their imprisonment of writers in violation of this right. We seek the investigation and prosecution of those who murder writers, a crime that is growing in frequency worldwide. And we monitor abuses of free expression in Australia. Each PEN Centre represents its membership, not its country, and membership of its Centres is open to all qualified writers, journalists, translators, historians and others actively engaged in any branch of literature, regardless of nationality, race, colour or religion. Membership is also open to non-writers who support PEN's objectives.

### **What is the Empty Chair?**

In 1980, the 15th of November was earmarked by International PEN as 'The Day of the Imprisoned Writer', a day when writers worldwide would come together to commemorate colleagues who had been punished for their work. At each event an 'empty chair' symbolised a writer who could not be present because they were imprisoned, detained, disappeared, threatened or killed. In most instances the chair represented a specific individual rather than all writers at risk.

Sydney PEN encourages individuals, organisations, libraries, institutions and writers' festivals to continue this tradition to maintain awareness of the plight of international writers. The Empty Chair has been embraced by the Sydney Writers' Festival, the Byron Bay Writers' Festival, the Melbourne Writers' Festival and other major literary gatherings for use in each of their sessions. It has appeared onstage at the Sydney Opera House, the State Library of NSW, and all Sydney PEN events.

### **Why should we take part?**

In Australia, we have the liberty to advocate for writers, editors and journalists who have been oppressed for expressions of peace, fellowship and equality. Often, this oppression is a denial of the UN Charter of Human Rights, and often it includes arrest without charge, indefinite detention, surveillance, torture, hard labour and death.

The Empty Chair campaign is a way of bringing Australian readers and writers together in a common cause, and giving an individual name and story to the overwhelming numbers of writers who have been targeted because of the positive empowerment that their words have offered.

We hope that communities who encounter the Empty Chair will be encouraged to find out more about Australian PEN Centres and International PEN, and to become members whose time and donation goes toward year-round campaigns on behalf of urgent cases.

Sydney PEN is setting a target to welcome fifty venues onboard the Empty Chair campaign by the end of 2009. Will your library be counted?

### **How does it work?**

It's too easy! You provide the empty chair – Sydney PEN provides the rest. At the end of each month, the kit featuring a different author profile will be available from the Sydney PEN website. This is the inaugural kit, featuring Chinese poet, writer and former Independent Chinese PEN President, Liu Xiaobo. The author profiles are drawn from International PEN's biannual case list of writers at risk, prepared by the Writers In Prison Committee.

All you need to do is print off the author profile and attach it (lamination recommended) to your chosen empty chair for display in the library/venue. Make sure your venue's community understands that the empty chair is a place of respect and should not be sat in, stood on or used to hold unrelated material. If you want to decorate your chair, hang it from the ceiling, or add PEN material to the author display, go for it!

### **Can we do more?**

- We encourage you to include the Empty Chair campaign in your library's author talks or public events. At the beginning of your event, the presenter or host indicates the chair, reads the following text and includes that month's featured writer profile.

Our library has adopted the Empty Chair campaign in affiliation with Sydney PEN. One of 144 centres of International PEN, the world's oldest international literary organization, Sydney PEN works to promote friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers to fight for the freedom to read and the freedom to write. The empty chair at this event represents: [insert current author profile]

- If your library wants to host a book club, why not join International PEN's Free the Word! Book Club? You'll find a new book title, with reviews and links, highlighted every month online. Visit:

<http://www.internationalpen.org.uk/go/literary-events/free-the-word-world-book-club>

- Please join Sydney PEN as an individual or organization by filling out and posting the enclosed form.

## THE EMPTY CHAIR

This chair represents a writer who is at risk because of their work. By displaying a different author profile each month, we have joined Sydney PEN in its fight for freedom to write and read around the world. For more information about PEN and how you can join, visit [www.pen.org.au](http://www.pen.org.au)



### LIU XIA and SUPPORTERS OF LIU XIAOBO

Sydney PEN is extremely concerned about the recent crack down on Chinese human rights defenders who were celebrating the award of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize to Dr Liu Xiaobo. Since the Nobel Committee announced its decision in October, Liu's wife, Liu Xia, a photographer and poet, has been held under de facto house arrest by Chinese authorities, restricted from meeting the media or her friends.

Also since the announcement of the Prize, writers, lawyers and human rights activists throughout China have been summoned, detained, house-arrested or forced to return to home regions. So far, over one hundred of individuals have suffered various forms of unlawful infringements due to their support of Liu's freedom and his Prize. Many of these individuals are members of Independent Chinese PEN Centre (ICPC).

Sydney PEN is currently undertaking communication with the Australian government regarding this case, and you can sign our online public petition letters to China's