



SYDNEY

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Rushdie attack: writers reflect on Freedom of Speech

Speaking up
for Julian

Farewell to Frank:
Life and Literature

Death in show
motion: Women
and girls under
Taliban rule



Celebrating the Nobel Peace Prize winners



We have a mixed bag to contemplate right now. Firstly, the good news. The Norwegian Nobel Committee announced that the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize should be awarded to writer and human rights defender Ales Bialiatski from Belarus, the Russian human rights

organisation Memorial, and the Ukrainian human rights organisation Center for Civil Liberties.

Responding to the news, PEN International president Burhan Sonmez described the Committee's decision as a fitting tribute to the winners' tireless work in support of freedom of expression and human rights in Belarus, the Russian Federation and Ukraine – where repression and violations persist.

The Peace Prize is one of six awards established by Swedish chemist (and inventor of dynamite) Alfred Nobel in 1895. The prize is considered the most expansive in its recognition, given that it awards people "who have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind."

PEN has been campaigning for Ales Bialiatski, a PEN Belarus member, since he was first arrested in July 2021. Today, PEN once again urges the Belarusian authorities to release him immediately and unconditionally, and to drop all charges against him. PEN reiterates our solidarity with the brave people of Belarus, who continue to fight for their human rights despite the authorities' relentless campaign to crush all dissent.

A year ago, PEN condemned the Russian authorities' decision to shut down Memorial International Society and Memorial Human Rights Centre, two of the most respected rights organisations in the country, as an assault on independent civil society. Today, PEN continues to stand with Memorial and its fearless activists and urge the authorities to repeal laws stifling free expression and association.

In February, PEN International released a letter signed by over 1000 writers worldwide – including Nobel laureates Svetlana Alexievich, Orhan Pamuk, Maria Ressa, Olga Tokarczuk and Mario Vargas Llosa – expressing solidarity with writers, journalists, artists,

and the people of Ukraine, condemning the Russian invasion and calling for an immediate end to the bloodshed.

Recently at its 88th World Congress in Uppsala, Sweden, PEN once again united in one voice to condemn the violence unleashed by Russian forces against Ukraine and to urge the Russian Federation to immediately end the war in Ukraine.

According to a Reuters survey, Belarusian opposition politician Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, British nature broadcaster David Attenborough, the World Health Organization, environmental activist Greta Thunberg, Pope Francis, Tuvalu's foreign minister Simon Kofe, and Myanmar's National Unity government were among those who had been nominated by Norwegian lawmakers.

On the other hand, PEN continues to lobby on behalf on the hundreds of writers who are constantly harassed, persecuted, gaoled and murdered by repressive regimes.

Myanmar's vibrant creative community of writers, poets, filmmakers, painters, musicians, satirists, graphic artists, and others who have stood at the forefront of reform and free expression continue to face violent oppression from the junta after the February 2021 military coup. In addition to targeted detentions and extrajudicial killings, the military junta sought to limit online expression and organisation through repeated internet shut-downs, online censorship, and increased surveillance via telecommunications companies. Following the military coup, Myanmar gaoled the third-highest number of writers and intellectuals in the world in 2021.

Right now, PEN calls for the release of Myanmar writer Wai Moe Naing, who was convicted and sentenced by a military court on August 12 to 10 years in prison on multiple charges of "incitement."

His sentencing indicates a further escalation of threats to free expression in Myanmar as a result of the military coup. PEN is deeply concerned about the safety of Wai Moe Naing, especially in light of the recent secret military executions of four pro-democracy activists, including musician Phyo Zayar Thaw and writer Ko Jimmy, for speaking out against the brutality of the regime.

Sandra Symons
Joint President

Exiled writers reflect on freedom of speech in America in light of Rushdie attack

For dissident writers fleeing persecution overseas, the United States has long been a safe haven, a place where freedom of expression is tolerated and, even, valued, reports New York correspondent **Jim Zarroli**.

Everything suddenly changed with the brutal attack on author Salman Rushdie at a speaking event in western New York.

"Oh my God! When I heard that, I was screaming," said Masih Alinejad, a writer and activist who has criticised the Iranian government. "I was just running corner to corner in my safe house and shouting and just calling my husband, 'I cannot believe this is happening in America, in New York'."

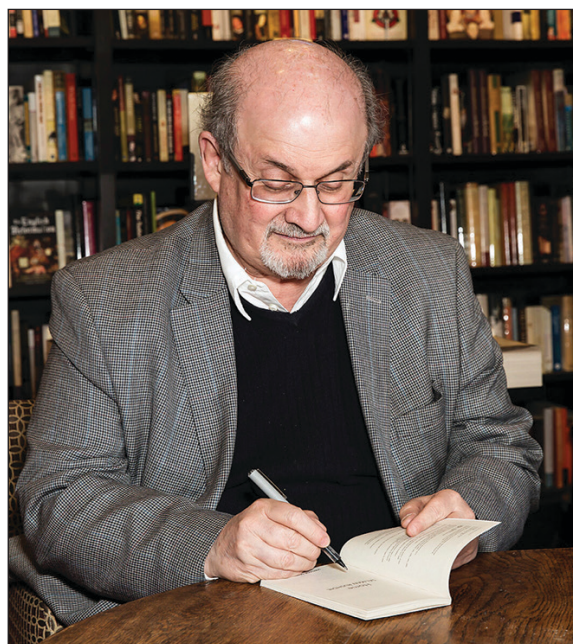
While literary writers in the U.S. increasingly face online threats, they rarely metastasise into actual physical attacks, said Karin Deutsch Karlekar, who directs the Writers at Risk program at PEN America. Authors routinely make public appearances with little or no security.

Such was the case with Rushdie. The India-born writer became the target of a Fatwa by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini in the late 1980s, over his depiction of the Prophet Muhammed in his book *The Satanic Verses*, and was forced into hiding.

"I used to say it when I was in Syria that I'm worried about freedom of speech in Syria. Now I'm worried about that even here in America."
Salman Rushdie

He ultimately emerged and moved to New York. Over time, he began making personal appearances and, in the process, turned into an eloquent proponent of the right to free speech.

"Many of us who joined this field grew up being sort of galvanised by his case and what had happened to him," Karlekar said. "And in the decades since he has really been this sort of stalwart defender of free expression for other writers at risk."



Salman Rushdie at a book signing.

By this year, the dangers he faced appeared to have faded. Then, on Aug. 12, as Rushdie was about to begin a lecture at the Chautauqua Institution, a man rushed the stage and stabbed him repeatedly. The 75-year-old writer was severely injured but survived.

Police arrested 24-year-old Hadi Matar of Fairview, New Jersey, who is said to have pro-Iran sympathies.

The viciousness of the attack is forcing speaking venues that regularly host writers to rethink their security procedures, according to an official of one organisation that often sponsors lectures.

But "unless you want to make every event like going to the airport", it's difficult if not impossible to

completely eliminate risk, said the official, who was not authorised to speak publicly.

As a result, dissident writers who had come to feel safe in the United States are questioning that assumption.

Osama Alomar, a Syrian poet who has criticised his government and was forced to flee into exile, lives in a house sponsored by a U.S. human-rights group, where he has felt safe. After the Rushdie attack, he's not as sure.

For journalist and activist Alinejad, an outspoken critic of Sharia law, the attack follows several incidents in which her safety was threatened. Last year, the FBI said it had foiled a plot by Iranian intelligence officers to kidnap Alinejad at her Brooklyn home. On July 28, a man was arrested carrying an AK-47 assault rifle outside her home.

Then came the attack on Rushdie, whom she has come to admire.

"To be honest, Salman Rushdie changed my life," she said. As a teenager in Iran, she was furious at the writer, because she was "brainwashed" by government propaganda, she said.

"But when I started doing my own research about him, I was like, 'This is unbelievable. This is what I believe now, that I have to speak out,'" she said.

While the threats against her have made her feel "miserable," she is resolved to keep writing and speaking out against tyranny.

Her dream now is to one day appear at the Chautauqua Institute, on the same stage where Rushdie was so viciously attacked this month.

Author loses sight in one eye

Salman Rushdie has lost sight in one eye and the use of one hand after the attack he suffered two months ago, his agent Andrew Wylie has confirmed.

The 75-year-old author, who received death threats from Iran in the 1980s after his novel *The Satanic Verses* was published, was stabbed in the neck and torso as he came on stage to give a talk on artistic freedom.

Until recently, the full extent of Rushdie's injuries had been unclear. But Mr Wylie, who represents literary giants such as Saul Bellow and Roberto Bolano, described the extent of the injuries Rushdie suffered in the "brutal" attack in an interview with Spanish newspaper *El Pais* as "profound".

"He had three serious wounds in his neck. One hand is incapacitated because the nerves in his arm were cut. And he has about 15 more wounds in his chest and torso."

The agent declined to say whether Rushdie was still in hospital, saying the most important thing was that the writer was going to live.

Mr Wylie said he and Mr Rushdie had talked about the possibility of such an attack in the past. "The principal danger that he faced so many years after the fatwa was imposed is from a random person coming out of nowhere and attacking him," he said.

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On the steps of New York Public Library, such prominent writers as Paul Auster, Gay Talese and Kiran Desai drew from Salman Rushdie's own words to express their solidarity with the 75-year-old after he was brutally attacked at a literary event in western New York. (Timothy A. Clary/AFP via Getty Images)

Paul Auster, Aasif Mandvi and others support Salman Rushdie with public readings

At a rally outside the New York Public Library, writers including Paul Auster and Gay Talese read passages from Salman Rushdie's work, reports Elizabeth Blair. His assailant has pleaded not guilty to attempted murder charges after being accused of stabbing Rushdie during a literary event at the Chautauqua Institution.

"Not even a blade to the throat could still the voice of Salman Rushdie," Suzanne Nossel, chief executive officer of the event's co-organizer, PEN America, told the audience.

The group of writers shared their affection and admiration for Rushdie, decried the violence and assured him they would continue to defend freedom of expression.

Roya Hakakian described herself as an "avid reader of Salman, a fellow writer and an Iranian" who stands with him. She read from the first chapter of Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* called 'The Shah of Blah'.

Jeffrey Eugenides told a story about the time, as a young fan of Rushdie's, he sought the author out, even going to his home in London. Eugenides told the crowd it was a time when "the only craziness visited upon a writer ... came from an over exuberant reader who showed up at his doorstep." He continued, "That world was called civilisation. Let's try to hang on to it."

Comedian Aasif Mandvi read from the author's forthcoming novel, *Victory City*. A.M. Holmes read from a lecture Rushdie gave on censorship at the PEN World Voices Festival in 2012. Paul Auster read from *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, Rushdie's autobiography. Since Rushdie couldn't publish under his own name, he combined the first names of two of his literary heroes, Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov.

Ms Nossel said that Rushdie planned to watch the live stream from his hospital room. "At a time when book bans and lies and disinformation engulf our politics," she said, "we must fight with vigour as if all our freedoms depend on it because they do."

Julian Assange's case is at the heart of free speech

As at August, more than 2000 journalists worldwide have expressed their grave concern for Julian Assange's wellbeing, for his continued detention and for the draconian espionage charges following an earlier announcement by the British government that it approved Mr Assange's extradition to the United States, where he could face life in prison over publishing secret military files.

This case stands at the heart of the principle of free speech. If the US government can prosecute Mr Assange for publishing classified documents, it may clear the way for governments to prosecute journalists anywhere, an alarming precedent for freedom of the press worldwide. Also, the use of espionage charges against people publishing materials provided by whistleblowers is a first and should alarm every journalist and publisher.

In a democracy, journalists can reveal war crimes and cases of torture and abuse without having to go to goal. It is the very role of the press in a democracy. If governments can use espionage laws against journalists and publishers, they are deprived of their most important and traditional defence – of acting in the public interest – which does not apply under the Espionage Act.

Prior to being moved to Belmarsh prison, Mr Assange spent more than a year under house arrest and then seven years inside the Ecuadorian embassy in London, where he had been granted political asylum. Throughout this time he was subjected to serious violations of his human rights, including having his legally privileged conversations spied on by organisations taking direct instruction from US agencies. Journalists visiting were subjected to pervasive surveillance. He had restricted access to legal defence and medical care and was deprived of exposure to sunlight and exercise. In April 2019, the Moreno government allowed UK law enforcement officers to enter the Ecuador embassy and seize Mr Assange. Since then he has been held in solitary confinement for up to 23 hours a day and, according to visitors, is "heavily medicated". His physical and mental health have seriously deteriorated.

As early as 2015 the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention (WGAD) determined that Mr Assange was arbitrarily detained and deprived of his liberty, and called for him to be released and paid compensation. In May 2019, the WGAD reiterated its concerns and request for his personal liberty to be restored.

Julian Assange has made an outstanding contribution to public interest journalism, transparency and government accountability around the world, according to WGAD. He is being singled out and prosecuted for publishing information that should never have been withheld from the public. His work has been recognised by the Walkley Award for Most Outstanding Contribution to Journalism in 2011, the Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism, the Index on Censorship prize, the Economist's New Media Award, the Amnesty International New Media Award, the 2019 Gavin MacFadyen Award and many others.

Mr Assange's reporting of abuses and crimes is of historic importance, as have been the contributions by whistleblowers Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning and Reality Winner, who are now in exile or incarcerated. They have all faced relentless smear campaigns waged by their opponents, campaigns that have often led to erroneous media reports and a lack of scrutiny and media coverage of their predicaments. The systematic abuse of Mr Assange's rights for the past nine years has been understood and protested by the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists and leading human rights organisations. But in public discussion there has been an insidious normalising of how he has been treated, WGAD says.

United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture Nils Melzer investigated the case and in June 2019 wrote:

"It finally dawned on me that I had been blinded by propaganda, and that Assange had been systematically slandered to divert attention from the crimes he exposed. Once he had been dehumanised through isolation, ridicule and shame, just like the witches we used to burn at the stake, it was easy to deprive him of his most fundamental rights without provoking public outrage worldwide. And thus, a legal precedent is being set, through the backdoor of our own complacency, which in the future can and will be applied just as well to disclosures by *The Guardian*, the *New York Times* and ABC News".



Sydney PEN, along with PEN centres in Melbourne and Perth, have held vigils for Julian Assange.

“By displaying an attitude of complacency at best, and of complicity at worst, Sweden, Ecuador, UK and US governments have created an atmosphere of impunity encouraging Mr Assange’s uninhibited vilification and abuse. In 20 years of work with victims of war, violence and political persecution I have never seen a group of

democratic States ganging up to deliberately isolate, demonize and abuse a single individual for such a long time and with so little regard for human dignity and the rule of law.”

Assange family takes campaign to Federal Parliament

Independent Member for Clark, Andrew Wilkie, reports he has joined Australian Assange campaign adviser, Greg Barns SC, as well as Julian Assange’s father, John Shipton, and brother, Gabriel Shipton, to discuss the latest developments in the ongoing battle to stop the WikiLeaks founder’s extradition to the United States.

“The situation has gone on way too long,” Mr Wilkie says. “Here we have an award-winning Australian journalist in deteriorating health who is being ruthlessly punished and pursued by the United States for simply telling the truth.

“With an application to appeal against the British Government’s decision to allow Mr Assange’s extradition to the US recently submitted to the British High Court, it’s way beyond time for Australia’s Prime Minister to make the call to his British and US counterparts to let this political prisoner walk free.

“Sitting on the fence is not an option when a man’s life is at stake. Not only will Mr Assange’s extradition likely mean a lifetime behind bars, it will also set an alarming precedent for all journalists as they too will be at risk of being incarcerated by any country they happen to offend. The torturous treatment meted out to this Australian father-of-two is an affront to any reasonable notion of justice and strikes at the very heart of media freedom.

“The matter is so deeply wrong on so many levels. It’s now more important than ever that the Prime Minister joins the growing chorus of voices advocating for Mr Assange’s immediate release.”

Death in show motion: Women and girls under Taliban

Women in Afghanistan have faced an onslaught of violence and human rights abuses since the Taliban's return to national power less than a year ago — and the “scope, magnitude and severity” of violations are “increasing month to month,” according to a new report by Amnesty International. The following is the executive summary of the extensive 98-page report.

In less than a year, the Taliban have decimated the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan. Soon after they took control of the country's government, the Taliban said they were committed to upholding the rights of women and girls. Yet they have violated women's and girls' rights to education, work and free movement; demolished the system of protection and support for women and girls fleeing domestic violence; arbitrarily detained women and girls for infractions of the Taliban's discriminatory rules; and contributed to a surge in the rates of child, early and forced marriage in Afghanistan.

Women who peacefully protested against these restrictions and policies have been harassed, threatened, arrested, forcibly disappeared, detained and tortured. The scope, magnitude and severity of the Taliban's violations against women and girls are increasing month by month.

Within a year of its takeover of Afghanistan, the group's draconian policies are depriving millions of women and girls of the opportunity to lead safe, free and fulfilling lives. They are being sentenced, as one Afghan woman put it, to death in slow motion. This death sentence for Afghan women and girls can only be lifted by major and wide-ranging policy changes by Taliban.

The international community must urgently develop and implement a robust, coordinated and effective strategy that pressures the Taliban to bring about these changes.

Amnesty International conducted research on the situation of women and girls under Taliban rule from September 2021 to June 2022, interviewing a total of 90 Afghan women and 11 girls. The ages of these women and girls ranged from 14 to 74 years old, and they lived in 20 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces.

Amnesty International also interviewed six current or former staff members of Taliban-run detention centres; 22 staff members of national and international NGOs and UN agencies and mechanisms; and 10 Afghan and international experts and journalists. The research was conducted through in-person interviews in Afghanistan from 4 to 20 March 2022, as well as through remote interviews.

This report describes a web of interrelated restrictions and prohibitions in which Afghan women and girls are trapped. It shows how the Taliban's violation of any single right can have pernicious implications for the exercise of other rights. Cumulatively, Taliban policies form a system of repression that discriminates against women and girls in Afghanistan in almost every aspect of their lives.

Amnesty International is a movement of 10 million people. Its vision is of a world where those in power keep their promises, respect international law and are held to account. It is independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion. It believes that acting in solidarity and compassion with people everywhere can change societies for the better.

On 1 July 2022, Amnesty International communicated the key findings detailed in this report in letters addressed to Minister of Foreign Affairs Amir Khan Muttaqi and Minister of Labor and Social Affairs Abdul Wali. No response had been received as of 15 July 2022, when the report was finalised.

Since their takeover, the Taliban have issued a series of policies, decrees and guidelines that violate the human rights of women and girls in Afghanistan, including those related to education, work, free movement and clothing.

In the area of education, the Taliban have prevented the vast majority of girls at the secondary level from returning to school. The Taliban called girls at the secondary level to return to school on 23 March 2022, only to send them home the same day, citing a “technical issue” related to their uniforms.



Women are confined to their homes. All photographs in this story by Kiana Hayden for Amnesty.

Fatima, a 25-year-old high school teacher based in Nangarhar province, summarized the feelings of her students: “These young girls just wanted to have a future, and now they don’t see any future ahead of them... There are millions of Afghan girls waiting for action.”

At the university level, the Taliban’s harassment of female students as well as restrictions on students’ behaviour, dress and opportunities have contributed to an unsafe environment where female students are systematically disadvantaged compared to male students. As a result, many female students have either stopped attending or decided not to enrol in university.

Other challenges affect girls’ and women’s access to education at all levels, including restrictions on their movement, teacher shortages and students’ lack of motivation due to limited career options under the Taliban.

The Taliban have prevented women across Afghanistan from working. Most female government employees have been told to stay at home, with the exception those working in certain sectors such as health and education. In the private sector, many women have been dismissed from high-level positions.

The Taliban’s policy appears to be that they will allow only women who cannot be replaced by men to keep working. Women who have continued working told Amnesty International that they are finding it extremely difficult in the face of Taliban restrictions on their clothing and behaviour, such as the requirement

for female doctors to avoid treating male patients or interacting with male colleagues.

Taliban restrictions on work have created a desperate situation for many women who were their families’ sole or primary wage-earner. For instance, Farida, an office worker, said: “When Nangarhar collapsed, the office was closed down... because men and women can’t work together... [My family] spent two weeks without food in our household. Previously, I couldn’t even think that we wouldn’t have food on the table.”

Taliban restrictions on women’s and girls’ freedom of movement have become increasingly repressive. Initially, they ordered women and girls to be accompanied by a mahram, or male chaperone, for long-distance journeys. Most recently, they decreed that women should not leave their homes unless necessary.

Women and girls told Amnesty International that in light of the numerous and evolving restrictions on their movement, any appearance in public without a mahram carried serious risks. They also said that the mahram requirements made their daily lives almost impossible to manage.

The Taliban have enforced increasingly strict guidelines on permissible clothing for women and girls. On 7 May 2022, the Ministry of Vice and Virtue issued a decree requiring women to cover themselves from head to toe. Male family members were made responsible for women’s adherence to the new rules,

and can be detained if women and girls in the family refuse to comply.

Zainab, a 27-year-old woman based in Daikundi province, shared her reaction to the decree: “Why would we cover our faces and hide who we are?... I have worn a [head scarf] all my life, but I do not want to cover my face... I can’t breathe now that I’m trying to talk about covering my face.”

Before August 2021, women and girl survivors of gender-based violence had access to a nationwide network of shelters and services, including legal representation, medical care and psycho-social support. Specialised prosecution units and courts dealt with cases involving violence against women and girls.

While the system had its limitations, it served thousands of women and girls each year. As the Taliban took control of Afghanistan, this system collapsed. Shelters were closed, and many were looted and appropriated by members of the Taliban. In some cases, Taliban members harassed or threatened staff.

As shelters closed, staff were forced to send many women and girl survivors back to their families. Other survivors were forced to live with shelter staff members, on the street or in other unsustainable situations.

Incomprehensibly, as the Taliban advanced across the country, they also systematically released detainees from prisons, many of whom had been convicted of gender-based violence offenses.

Survivors of gender-based violence and the women who worked within the system of protective services are now in grave danger. Meanwhile, women and girls who have fled violence since the Taliban’s takeover have nowhere to turn.

Fariha was nine months pregnant when she spoke to Amnesty International. She was desperately seeking a safe place to live after escaping her husband’s abuse. “Before, there was a shelter, and I went to that place,” she said. “They said it’s not running now, and they can’t accept any new cases. There are no options for me now.”

According to four individuals who worked in Taliban-run detention centres, the Taliban have arbitrarily arrested and detained women and girls for violating their discriminatory policies, such as the rules against appearing in public without a mahram or appearing in public with a man who does not qualify as a mahram.

Those arrested have usually been charged with the vague and ambiguous “crime” of “moral corruption”. The four prison staff members also told Amnesty International that survivors of gender-based violence who were formerly based in the shelters are now being detained in the same two detention centres in Afghanistan.

Women and girls arbitrarily detained due to alleged “moral corruption” or for fleeing abuse have been denied access to legal counsel and subjected to torture and other ill-treatment as well as inhuman conditions in detention.

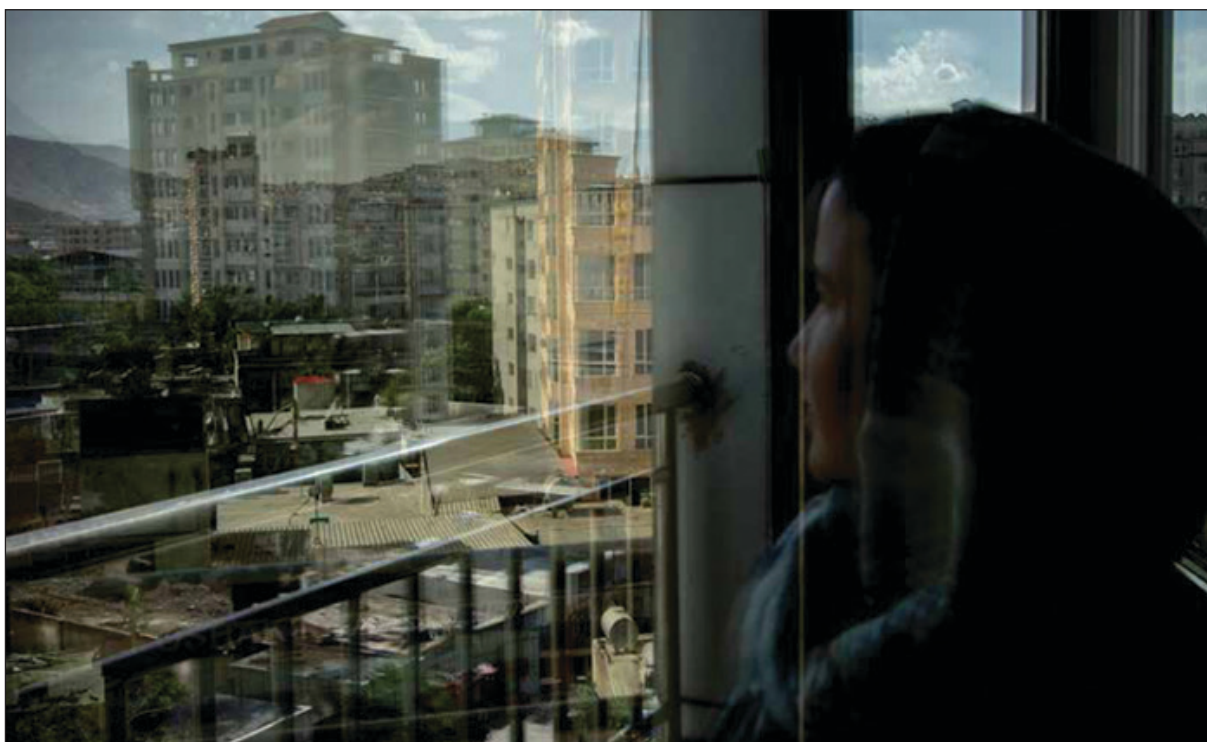
One university student was detained in 2022 on charges related to the Taliban’s mahram restrictions. She said that soon after her arrest, Taliban members “started giving me electric shocks [with a taser]... on my shoulder, face, neck, everywhere they could... They were calling me a prostitute [and] a bitch... The one holding the gun said, ‘I will kill you, and no one will be able to find your body.’”

She said that like all women and girls detained by the Taliban, her detention would stigmatize her for life. “For an Afghan girl, going to prison is no less than death... Once you enter the door, you are labelled, and you cannot erase it.”

According to Amnesty International’s research, corroborated by national and international organisations operating in Afghanistan, local activists and other experts, the rates of child, early and forced marriage in Afghanistan are surging under Taliban rule. This increase is due to several interrelated drivers, many of which are attributable to the actions and policies of the Taliban and its members since they seized control.

The most common drivers include the economic and humanitarian crisis; the lack of educational and professional prospects for women and girls; families’ perceived need to protect their daughters from marriage with a Taliban member; families forcing women and girls to marry Taliban members; and Taliban





Locked up with nowhere to go.

members forcing women and girls to marry them.

Khorsheed, a 35-year-old woman from a central province of Afghanistan, told Amnesty International that as a result of the economic crisis in Afghanistan, she had been forced to marry her 13-year-old daughter to her 30-year-old neighbour in September 2021, in exchange for a “bride price” of 60,000 Afghanis (around US\$670).

She said that after her daughter’s marriage, she felt relieved. “She won’t be hungry anymore,” Khorsheed said. She said she was considering marrying off her 10-year-old daughter as well, but she was reluctant to do so, as she hoped this daughter might provide for the family in the future.

She explained, “She went all the way to fifth grade. I wanted her to study more. She would be able to read and write, and speak English, and earn... I have a hope that this daughter will become something, and she will support the family. Of course, if they don’t open the school, I will have to marry her off.”

The systemic discrimination imposed by the Taliban has led to a wave of peaceful protests by women and girls across Afghanistan. The Taliban has violated the rights of these women and girls to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and subjected them to harassment and abuse during protests, including beating and electric shocks by tasers.

On 30 May 2022, Taliban Foreign Minister Amir Khan Mutaqqi said, “In the past nine months, not a single woman has been imprisoned in the gaols of Afghanistan either due to political opposition or raising voice against the government.”

This is not true. Based on interviews with 12 women who were involved in protests after the Taliban’s takeover, five of whom were detained, Amnesty International has found that many women protesters in Afghanistan have been subjected to arbitrary arrest and detention, enforced disappearance and torture and other ill-treatment.

One woman who participated in several peaceful protests was arrested and detained for 10 days in 2022. She described her treatment during detention: “[The Taliban guards] kept coming to my room and showing me pictures of my family. They kept repeating... ‘We can kill them, all of them, and you won’t be able to do anything... Don’t cry, don’t make a scene. After protesting, you should have expected days like this.’”

She said that while in detention, she was severely beaten on two occasions. “They locked the door,” she said. “They started screaming at me... [One Taliban member] said, ‘You nasty woman... America isn’t giving us the money because of you bitches’... Then he kicked me. It was so strong that my back was injured, and he kicked my chin too... I still feel the pain in my mouth. It hurts whenever I want to talk.”

Women protesters who were detained by the Taliban said they had inadequate access to food, water, ventilation, sanitary products and medical care. To secure their release, the women were forced to sign “agreements” that they and their family members would neither protest again nor speak publicly about their experiences during detention.

The full report is available on the Amnesty International website.

‘I thought about the efforts and struggles of two decades... and cried’

In November 2020, Zahra Joya decided to create an Afghan news agency run by and for women — an online news service that would counter the prevailing patriarchal norms of Afghanistan. The news agency was named after a young woman, Rukhshana, who in 2015 was stoned to death by the Taliban in Ghor province for fleeing a forced marriage.

At the time we started, I was also working as deputy director of media and public awareness for the Kabul municipality, and I was spending much of my salary — the equivalent of about \$1,000 a month — to employ three other female journalists. Some of my friends worked voluntarily, bringing our full staff to six.

Our reporters were mostly untrained, but they knew the struggles of their own lives and could report with empathy about other women. They covered many previously uncovered or under-covered issues, from the street harassment that a majority of Afghan women face to the experience of menstruation.

In Afghanistan, particularly in remote areas, many teenage girls are unaware of menstruation before it happens to them, and when suddenly experiencing it, they feel stressed and sometimes go into nervous shock. Menstruation was like a taboo, and we wanted to help normalise it.

We also interviewed girls and women who had been raped, including the particularly upsetting case of a nine-year-old child. Other media reported that the rape had occurred in March last year, but we searched out the family and reported the details of what happened. The child lost a lot of blood in the assault and had to be taken to a hospital to undergo surgery. An aunt of the young girl, who was raising her at the request of the child’s father, told us that after the assault, neighbours and others looked on her family with contempt. The aunt said they did not know where to “take refuge.”

That kind of reporting is now at risk. Like so many other Afghans, I never imagined that the Taliban would retake Afghanistan so quickly, and that my family and Rukhshana Media’s team of journalists would be forced into hiding or exile. Yet on August 15, 2021, we all faced an excruciating dilemma. Under the Taliban, we believed women would have



Zahra Joya, the founder of a news agency dedicated to covering the lives and concerns of Afghan women on how female journalists are still reporting the news.

only two choices: You either accept their oppressive laws and live by them, totally changing your identity, or you live as you did and risk getting killed.

As someone who struggled hard to get where I am, both options were unacceptable. I couldn’t accept having to see the world through the prison bars of a burqa, nor did I want to die. So when I received a call from the British embassy on August 24 giving me a chance to board a flight out, I took it.

For almost a year now, other Afghan women have been waking up each morning to the bitter reality that they live under a gender apartheid regime. The Ministry of Women’s Affairs has been eliminated, and the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice has taken over its offices.

Millions of teenage girls have been hoping to return to their schools, but the Taliban keep prevaricating and delaying. Rukhshana has reported that violence against women at home and in public is on the rise, with bodies turning up on the streets like discarded waste. Afghan women who enjoyed certain political, social, and career freedoms a year ago now must often stifle their ambitions.

“Women and girls in particular have been subjected to severe restrictions on their human rights,” says a recent United Nations report, “resulting in their exclusion from most aspects of everyday and public life.”

Female journalists face particular challenges, including intimidation, lack of access to information, and severe discrimination. Surveys vary, but those that have been conducted during the past year show that most women journalists have lost their jobs since the Taliban takeover. In some provinces of Afghanistan, women are not allowed to work at all.

According to our reporting, the Taliban have banned the broadcast of women’s voices in some areas, as well as the broadcast of movies with female actors. Media outlets have been instructed to separate the offices of men and women, to prevent them from working together directly. In March this year, the Taliban banned private news channels in Afghanistan from rebroadcasting programs of the BBC, VOA, and Deutsche Welle, reportedly because of the way their news presenters dressed. In May, the Taliban ordered all female TV presenters to cover their faces. In some places, it has also banned female journalists from attending its press conferences.

When the Taliban forced female presenters to wear the hijab, I edited the news with a heavy heart. To me, it meant that a form of social imprisonment was being reimposed. At about six o’clock that evening, I turned off the computer in my room here in London, far from Afghanistan, and for a moment I thought about the efforts and struggles of two decades — especially the struggles of Afghan women — and cried.

Despite all these restrictions, however, female journalists continue to work. A female presenter for a private television station told me she finds it challenging to wear a mask while working on-air — she can’t breathe properly and has difficulty pronouncing her words clearly — but added that she won’t give up doing on-air work. Some female reporters, meanwhile, have taken on male aliases, to better hide their identity and protect themselves.

After the Taliban takeover, Rukhshana remained committed to providing opportunities to female journalists. But fear prevailed, and we had difficulty recruiting — particularly in the provinces and outside the main cities. So almost two months after the Taliban took power, we hired our first male reporter. Since then, we’ve enlisted others who share our commitment to telling the stories of women.

Together, our female and male reporters, often working covertly, aim to report for their fellow

Afghans but also for audiences around the world, so they too can know what the people of Afghanistan are going through in the current crisis. We publish in both Dari and English, and use social platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram to disseminate our news reports and video.

All of our reporters in Afghanistan write under pseudonyms and have very little access to official information. Still, they try. In February this year, a reporter who goes by the name Nasiba Arefi called a Taliban spokesman for the police in western Herat to ask about two dead bodies that had been hung from the shovel of a giant backhoe.

Instead of answering her questions, the spokesman made demands: First, he said the media outlet where she worked had to pledge to operate according to Taliban policies. Second, she should send any reporting to him for review before publication, and she should never use the term “Taliban group” (which is regarded as a term used by the Taliban’s enemies to delegitimise its rule).

Rukhshana published the story with the information we had. The Taliban official later texted Arefi, asking her to provide him with the address and details of the media outlet where she worked. She declined, fearful that she could be arrested or harassed.

We always have to tread carefully. In order to ensure the safety of our interviewees and reporters, we sometimes decline to publish sensitive stories. Once, we deleted a story from our website and social media accounts because I’d received a call from a man saying that if we didn’t delete it, “we will find your reporter.”

The remaining female journalists in Afghanistan have one thing in common: They love their work, and feel it is more vital than ever. “I love journalism and I will never give up,” one Rukhshana journalist told me. Still, there are times when female reporters question themselves. A woman journalist for a television station in Kabul recently told Rukhshana that she can spend days trying to get comment or information from Taliban officials — without result. “This situation makes me more discouraged from working as a journalist every day,” she says.

Journalists also face financial stress. I started Rukhshana with the hope that when other media outlets realised the importance of our work, they might support us financially. But we did not receive that sort of backing, at least initially. Now that so many Afghan media organisations are shrinking or collapsing, such support is more important than ever, and even harder to get.

Still, we’ve been very fortunate. Last year, a friend conducted a fundraising drive in Canada that brought in enough money to cover our operations for nearly a year, and more recently we received funding from Internews. We now have four full-time editors, seven staff reporters, and several freelancers who work for us regularly. We’re not exactly booming, but we’re far from folding. Too many women are rooting for us.

The growing movement to censor books in schools

More books banned. More students losing access to literature. ‘More’ is the operative word for a comprehensive report on book banning in American schools compiled by **Dr Jonathan Friedman** and edited by **Nadine Farid Johnson** for American PEN. This is an excerpt from their report.

Many Americans may conceive of challenges to books in schools in terms of reactive parents, or those simply concerned after thumbing through a paperback in their child’s knapsack or hearing a surprising question about a novel raised by their child at the dinner table. However, the large majority of book bans underway today are not spontaneous, organic expressions of citizen concern. Rather, they reflect the work of a growing number of advocacy organisations that have made demanding censorship of certain books and ideas in schools part of their mission.

The vast majority of the books targeted by these groups for removal feature LGBTQ+ characters or characters of colour, and/or cover race and racism in American history, LGBTQ+ identities, or sex education.

This movement to ban books is deeply undemocratic, in that it often seeks to impose restrictions on all students and families based on the preferences of those calling for the bans and notwithstanding polls that consistently show that Americans of all political persuasions oppose book bans. And it is having multifaceted, harmful impacts: on students who have a right to access a diverse range of stories and perspectives, and especially on those from historically marginalised backgrounds who are watching their library shelves emptied of books that reflect and speak to them; on educators and librarians who are operating in some states in an increasingly punitive and surveillance-oriented environment with a chilling effect on teaching and learning; on the authors whose works are being targeted; and on parents who want to raise students in schools that remain open to curiosity, discovery, and the freedom to read.

Altogether, this report paints a deeply concerning picture for access to literature, and diverse literature in particular, in schools in the coming school year. Book banning and educational gag orders are two fronts in an all-out war on education and the open discussion and debate of ideas.

What types of content are being banned?

Beginning in 2021, a range of individuals and groups sought to remove from schools books focused on issues

of race or the history of slavery and racism; it morphed to include a heightened focus on LGBTQ+ issues and identities.

While debate on these issues recurs, wholesale bans on books deny young people the opportunity to learn, to get answers to pressing questions, and to obtain crucial information. At the same time, the efforts to target books containing LGBTQ+ characters or themes are frequently drawing on long-standing, denigrating stereotypes that suggest LGBTQ+ content is inherently sexual or pornographic.

The most banned titles include the groundbreaking work of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, along with best-selling books that have inspired feature films, television series, and a Broadway show. They include: *Gender Queer: A Memoir* by Maia Kobabe, *All Boys Aren’t Blue* by George M. Johnson, *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Pérez, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison, *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, *Me and Earl and the Dying Girl* by Jesse Andrews, *Crank* by Ellen Hopkins, *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* by Susan Kuklin and *Drama: A Graphic Novel* by Raina Telgemeier.

The most banned authors include winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature, the National Book Award for Young People’s Literature, the Booker Prize, the Newbery Award, the Caldecott Medal, the Eisner Award, the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, the NAACP Image Award, the GLAAD Award for Media Representation, the Stonewall Award, and more.

Who Is Behind Book Bans? The Role of Groups

Book bans in public schools have recurred throughout American history, with notable flare-ups in the McCarthy era and the early 1980s. But, while long present, the scope of such censorship has expanded drastically and in unprecedented fashion since the beginning of the 2021–22 school year. This campaign is in part driven by politics,



Attendees at a school meeting raise their hands in support of speakers criticising the school board for suggesting that sexually explicit books be banned at county schools. (Peter Cihelka/The Free Lance-Star via AP)

with state lawmakers and executive branch officials pushing for bans in some cases.

While parents and guardians ought to be partners with educators in their children’s education, and need channels for communicating with school administrators, teachers, and librarians, particularly concerning the education of their own children, public schools are by design supposed to rely on the expertise, ethics, and discretion of educational professionals to make decisions. In too many places, today’s political rhetoric of “parents’ rights” is being weaponised to undermine, intimidate, and chill the practices of these professionals, with potentially profound impacts on how students learn and access ideas and information in schools.

The unrelenting wave of challenges to the inclusion of certain books in school libraries — whether promulgated at the urging of an individual community member, grassroots organization, or government official — has spurred another phenomenon: preemptive book banning. In April, May, and June 2022, PEN America tracked several cases where school administrators have banned books in the absence of any challenge in their own district, seemingly in a preemptive response to potential bills, threats from state officials, or challenges in other districts.

Conclusion

The unprecedented flood of book bans in the 2021–22 school year reflects the increasing organisation of groups involved in advocating for such bans, the increased involvement of state officials in book-banning debates, and the introduction of new laws and policies. More often than not, current challenges to books originate not from concerned parents acting individually but from political and advocacy groups working in

concert to achieve the goal of limiting what books students can access and read in public schools.

As noted previously, the resulting harm is widespread, affecting pedagogy and intellectual freedom and placing limits on the professional autonomy of school librarians and teachers. The repercussions extend further, however, to the well-being of the students affected by these bans. Children deserve to see themselves in books, and they deserve access to a diversity of stories and perspectives that help them understand and navigate the world around them. Public schools that ban books reflecting diverse identities risk creating an environment in which students feel excluded, with potentially profound effects on how students learn and become informed citizens in a pluralistic and diverse society.

Book challenges impede free expression rights, which must be the bedrock of public schools in an open, inclusive, and democratic society. These bans pose a dangerous precedent to those in and out of schools, intersecting with other movements to block or curtail the advances in civil rights for historically marginalized people.

The dynamics surrounding school book bans are a canary in the coal mine for the future of American democracy, public education, and free expression. We should heed this warning.

This report by Jonathan Friedman, director, Free Expression and Education Programs, is based on research and analysis by Tasslyn Magnusson, Ph.D., and Sabrina Baeta. The full report may be found at: <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>

The Power of Words: future challenges for freedom of expression

Sydney PEN Committee Member **Mansour Razaghi** attended the 88th PEN International Congress which focused on the power of the word. Here is his report.

When I landed in Sweden to attend the 88th PEN International Congress, the first thing I did was to attend a protest in Stockholm in which thousands of people, mainly Iranian expatriates, were chanting “Woman, Life, Freedom”.

Two days later, when I was walking through the paved streets of Uppsala on the way to my accommodation, I came across a candle vigil for Mahsa Amini, the young Kurdish girl who died in police detention after her arrest for having her hair exposed. I stopped. I held my breath. I could hear the chants that the people in the city of Saqqez were shouting at her burial: “Woman, Life, Freedom!” and “Down with the Dictator!”. Saqqez is my hometown. I escaped after a violent arrest 39 years ago.

Mahsa was present in several discussions throughout the congress in Uppsala. PEN Sydney played a pivotal role in introducing a statement that the congress agreed to unanimously in which her brutal killing was condemned and a strong message of solidarity sent to the women and people in Iran.

Here is that statement.

“Mahsa (Zhina) Amini was a 22-year-old Kurdish Iranian woman whose death in custody following her arrest by Iran’s “morality police” has sparked continuing mass protests across Iran.

Mahsa was arrested on September 13 in Tehran for allegedly not following the country’s dress code for women. According to media reports, she was tortured while in custody, an allegation the police deny. She was taken to Kasra Hospital in Tehran where she remained in a coma until pronounced dead on September 16.

The Iranian authorities maintain that Mahsa suffered a heart attack, an account that is not accepted by her family.

When her body was taken to her hometown of Saqqez, people were waiting to support the family at the funeral. This gathering was the starting point for

the mass protests across Iran. Protesters gathered in the streets carrying posters and shouting the slogans.

The authorities have brutally cracked down on protests — unofficial reports claim many people have been killed or injured and thousands have been arrested. Recent media reports raised concerns over widespread internet outages and restricted internet services which severely affected access to information regarding the government’s brutal response.

At least 13 were killed and many others were injured following Iranian missiles and drones’ attacks on the Kurdish region of northern Iraq on 28 September. Iranian authorities claim that the attacks targeted Kurdish groups behind the widespread protests that followed Mahsa’s death.”

Both the Women’s Writers Committee and Peace Committee endorsed the statement. On the final day of the congress, the statement was presented and unanimously endorsed and passed.

The congress strongly condemned the regime’s brutal crackdown on the protesters and announced its support for the women and people of Iran in their fight for freedom, equality and justice:

“For the past four decades, Iran’s regime has maintained its grip on the country through mass killing, torture, imprisonments, censorship, and curtailing of essential freedoms. Political activists, writers, poets, artists, workers, teachers, and students have been arrested, tortured, and killed.

“We, the members of PEN International at the 88th Congress, in Uppsala, Sweden, strongly condemn the brutal crackdown on freedom of expression in Iran. We stand in solidarity with the women and people of Iran in their fight for freedom and justice and support their demands for a future without tyranny and dictatorship.

“We call for an immediate halt to military strikes, an end to the crackdown on freedom of expression in Iran, and demand that bring Mahsa’s killers to justice.”

A week of debate, challenge and reinterpretation

The week-long Congress brought together 400 writers from over 100 PEN Centres, to debate, challenge and reinterpret PEN's understanding of issues such as hate speech, digital surveillance, climate change, war and post-conflict, as well PEN's work moving forward.

"As we are witnessing the emergence of new ways to self-express and exercise the right to hold opinions, receive information and ideas, and impart information, literature is taking on new forms, and with that also the way freedom of expression is challenged, controlled, restricted or completely and forcibly put to an end," said Burhan Sonmez, PEN International President.

"One hundred years since our foundation, it is now more important than ever to develop new ways to defend and embrace freedom".

Highlights of this year's gathering were four online events featuring a line-up of acclaimed literary voices: The Congress's opening ceremony included 'The Power of Words', a keynote speech by acclaimed American novelist and essayist Siri Hustvedt; and 'Ukrainian Literature Set Free', a panel discussion on the depth and complexity of Ukrainian literature between Ukrainian writers Andrei Kurkov, Lesyk Panasiuk and Daryna Gladun, and moderated by literary critic Jenny Aschenbrenner.

"The role of the written word is not incidental to the threat of authoritarianism. Although words serve as masks for authoritarian ideologies, they are also vehicles of liberation from them," said Siri Hustvedt.

'The Problem with Hate Speech' was a discussion on the importance of countering the challenges posed by hate speech while guaranteeing freedom of expression with authors Siri Hustvedt, Salil Tripathi, Danson Kahyana and Swedish PEN President Jesper Bengtsson.

'Absence and Disappearance' was an exploration of these notions in the context of societal and political struggle - with PEN International President Burhan Sonmez and Syrian writer Yassin Al Haj Saleh.

'Cultural Rights in Times of War and Post-Conflict' was a reflection on the need to safeguard and use arts, literature and culture to promote peace with author Andrei Kurkov, blogger Hayder Hamzoz, editor Neelufer Suhrabi, academic Andrea Lesic and poet Germán Rojas.



Mansour Razaghi with Emelie Wieslander, head of the Unit of Documentation and Freedom of Expression at the Dawit Isaak Library in Malmö, Sweden. Mr Razaghi donated, on behalf of Sydney PEN, two books banned in Iran to the library which keeps books that have been banned, censored or the author has been threatened or killed.

Farewell to Frank: Life and Literature

In a moving oration, **Don Anderson** paid tribute to his friend of 60 years at a gathering of friends and admirers of Frank Moorhouse AM at the State Library of NSW on July 13. Frank Moorhouse had been a long-time supporter of PEN.

"Thank you, Frank, for your fiction and so much more non-fiction, newspaper and magazine columns and support for Australian writers."

The phone call, which my wife Angela Bowne and I received around breakfast time on 26 June 2022, said that our friend Frank had "passed away peacefully" in the small hours of the morning. We were aware that he was and had been ill for some time, hospitalised, depressed, but that did not make the news any less distressing. Literate folk often invoke lines of the Welsh bard Dylan Thomas in these circumstances (1947).

*Do not go gentle into that good night
Old age should burn and rave at close of day
Rage, Rage against the dying of the light*

Such words might seem particularly fitting for Frank whose anthology *Days of Wine and Rage* (1980) definitively conveyed the taste and smells of Sydney and its thinking /drinking class in the 'seventies, though it should be recalled that at the book's launch at the New Hellas restaurant opposite the southern end of Hyde Park on Elizabeth Street, we wild young things drank the New Hellas out of ... not ouzo, but mineral water.

The information that Frank had passed peacefully reminded me not so much of Dylan Thomas as of John Donne's "A Valediction forbidding Mourning" (1611):

*As virtuous men pass mildly away
And whisper to their souls to go
Whilst some of their sad friends do say
The breath goes now, and some say, No.*

Frank was ever virtuous though not, it must be stressed, in the Machiavellian sense. He was a great admirer, as which virtuous person cannot be, of the life

and work of Samuel Johnson. Truth to tell, occasionally, flown with insolence and wine, we fantasised about composing a Life of Johnson for television. Nothing came of this. We did, however, along with our friend Professor Stephen Knight, admire this side idolatory, Johnson's elegy for Dr Robert Levet:

*Condemned to Hope's delusive mine,
As on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts, or slow decline,
Our social comforts drop away.*

Johnson, we were touched to learn, had a cat named Hodge (short for Roger), whom he fed oysters. Frank was a great proselytiser for oysters. He, too, had a cat, named Ward, who was Interlocutor to Frank's Bones in their Bulletin "Around the Laundromats" columns, the name of which, O! Irony, had to be changed because the Westinghouse Corporation maintained that it violated their intellectual property.

Frank published 17 volumes of fiction and non-fiction between 1969 and 2014. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia for service to Australian literature in 1985, and in 2001 received the Centenary Award for service to Australian society through writing. He was conferred a Doctor of Letters honoris causa by the University of Sydney where he had decades previously been Writer-in-Residence in the English Department, home to Australia's first Chair of Australian Literature, among the many honors academic, literary and journalistic which were bestowed upon him.

The English Department was also by that time home to the journal *Southerly* in which Frank had first published a story when the magazine was edited



Picture credit: Bob Finlayson

by journalist and poet Kenneth Slessor. Volume 1 of 1976 of that quarterly published my essay, “Frank Moorhouse’s Discontinuities”, which began: “Frank Moorhouse ‘writes short stories and does not intend to write a conventional novel. At present completing another discontinuous narrative called *The Americans*, Baby. Is opposed to all censorship.’ Thus, in the biographical note to the first edition of *Futility and Other Animals* (Gareth Powell & Associates, Sydney, 1969; italics mine), Moorhouse threw down his gages. Both have been taken up. Publishers, distributors, and governments have continued to censor him; reviewers have insisted on referring to his books as “novels”. One can only wonder which he finds the more offensive. In a prefatory note to *Futility and Other Animals*, which is subtitled ‘a discontinuous narrative’, Moorhouse adumbrates his themes and insists upon his method.

Thus the term “discontinuous narrative” was broadcast to the world, and for at least a dozen volumes Frank continued to practise it. There is, of course, an irony here. A quarter of a century later,

Frank published the first volume of what would come to be known as the “Edith trilogy”, after its central figure, Edith Campbell Berry. The titles are: *Grand Days* (1993), *Dark Palace* (2000), and *Cold Light* (2011). Taken together they make that fabled beast, the Victorian triple-decker novel look like mere postage stamps. They are also significantly Frank’s most admired books by women.

Frank was always, through his long and distinguished career, a warrior for freedom. Freedom from censorship, freedom for justice for authors (especially financial), freedom from sexual restrictions in life as in writing. This was recognised by, amongst other things, the 2007 PEN Keneally award for his achievements in promoting freedom of expression, international understanding and access to literature, his appointment to PEN’s distinguished writers panel and his award of life membership of PEN.

He was also committed to education as his years with the Workers’ Educational Association and several universities from Griffith University to Kings College,

Cambridge, bear witness. These may be yoked by violence together (Johnson on Donne, both again) in an account of the reading Frank gave some time before 1972 of his story “Anti-Bureaucratism and the Apparatchiki” at an Adult Education conference at Bathurst Teachers’ College / CAE. A *compositio loci*, to invoke Ignatius Loyola, is necessary. Such gatherings were largely composed of women. Frank, for reasons that became obvious but are perhaps not so obvious half a century later, had all the house lights extinguished, the only light being from the small lamp on the desk at which he sat while he read. A paradigm of what used to be called the Literature of Embarrassment. He began:

“FELLATIO.”

She thought he said something like, “Hell’s art below”. She wriggled and held her head away from him to catch it.

“Sorry?” she whispered, striving to hear.

“Fellatio,” he whispered urgently and at the same time somehow twisted her and the bed clothes.

He was pushing her head down. ... For a twirling moment she didn’t know what to do. She felt his moving tongue. It tingled. But then she smelt his backside.

“What’s wrong?” he said, turning his head up at her, out of breath. ... “Don’t you like cunnilingus?”

Nor did many members of the audience, not writing about it or reading it in public at least, as their remarks to me, their tutor for an American Novel class (where we decidedly did not read Portnoy’s Complaint) bore witness.

It was not all fun and games in the fresh fields and pastures new of Adult Education. Frank once invited me to be his guest at a weekly Creative Writing class he conducted as part of his Writer-in-Residency at the University of Canberra. The evening’s topic was “Re-Writing” and the students were asked to read a new story of Frank’s which had recently appeared in a Little Magazine, as well as photocopies of the 10 copies of the drafts which had paved the way for the finished product and which he had provided for the students to demonstrate the importance, *inter alia*, of self-criticism.

After some introductory remarks, he called for comments and questions from the class. The first hand went up at the back of the room – they always came from the back of the room. “Urghh, Mr Moorhouse, did you say that you wrote these 10 drafts you gave us?” Frank, pleased that someone was paying attention: “Yes.” Student: “You must waste an awful lot of paper.”

Frank was fully a professional writer, and took his professional responsibilities very seriously. He was President of the Australian Society of Authors from 1981-1983, and champion of authors’ copyright rights as the 1975 High Court case of *University of NSW v Moorhouse* bore witness. He played a significant role in the establishing of the Copyright Council of Australia. But I like to think of him as friend to many, to lovers and patrons.



Picture credit: Pip Blackwood/Newspix

He lived in France for many years, and delighted in Marcel Mauss’s work on the Gift Economy, and Michel Butor’s on categorisation by friends. He was a *bon viveur* (or is it *bon vivant*?) as is testified by his *Martini: a Memoir* (2005). I have before me an unpublished text bearing the Maussian subject line “what a gift” thanking Angela and myself for a birthday lunch we gave him at Saint Peter in Paddington.

He writes: “The oysters were in perfect condition. Flawless, although I prefer a larger plate so that I can examine the shells – I am sure you have heard my oyster shell forensic lecture. I like to do a reading of the shells. I did not bring my oyster loupe so you were spared that.” He apologises for his “panic attack about dementia and therefore my lateness”, adding: “A double Australian whisky is one medication I can recommend for such attacks.”

His capacity for drollery does not make his passing any easier to contemplate. I recall the words I overheard offered by Betty Roland to Dorothy Hewett at an adult education class: “Getting old isn’t any fun, Dorothy.”

Freedom of speech for whom?

Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi, author of *Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud*, delivered PEN's special address at the 2022 Sydney Writers' Festival.

I'll start by acknowledging the sovereign owners of the land we are on, the Gadigal people and pay my respects to elders past and present. This is, always was, and always will be Aboriginal land.

I'd also like to acknowledge that there can be no social or environmental justice without racial justice, and there can be no racial justice without First Nations justice. So as we strive for justice and equity, First Nations people and their voices must be front and centre of this struggle. Justice must come on their terms not ours.

As we gather here and discuss these ideas – reflect, debate and listen to one another – it should never be far from our minds that even such basic rights cannot be taken for granted. It is in recognition of the struggle and plight of people whose rights have been limited, infringed and in many cases they have been penalised for speaking out, that we come together this afternoon.

We resolve and make a commitment to each other to do more, whatever we can, to ensure that freedom of expression is upheld, that marginalised voices are heard, and that stories that were not supposed to see the light of day or deemed important enough to be told, get told.

Who gets heard

In my ramblings this afternoon on freedom of speech, I hope to explore who gets heard and who doesn't, who is given a voice and who is silenced, what are the consequences and what needs to change. The ideas I will talk about today are also reflected in depth in my book *Too Migrant, Too Muslim, Too Loud*.

There is somewhat of an irony in me delivering this lecture today. I am an Australian Senator. As one of 76 senators and one of 227 politicians democratically elected to represent our community in Federal Parliament, on paper I have one of the biggest platforms and potentially loudest voices of anyone in this country.

Federal parliamentarians, because of our position, are listened to. You can't escape hearing from at least a few of us if you tune into the news on any given day. Sometimes – and I can think of more than a few of my colleagues when I say this – you might want to escape it! But in our democracy, as a matter of course, MPs generally get heard.

Here lies nuance, though, and one of many contradictions that I would like to tease out this afternoon, drawing on my own personal experiences, as well as the reflections of others I respect and care about.

Formal positions rarely reflect in any simple or logical way the power someone wields – or the voice someone has – in any system. It is much more complex than that. Old, heaving structures of race, class, gender, and social standing shape the power and influence a person wields in our society regardless of what their title might be, or the positional role they occupy.

In my case, and in the case of people like me, let's put it bluntly.

As a settler colonial country founded on the dispossession and genocide of First Nations people, and the enforcement of racist legislation such as the White Australia Policy for much of the last century, Australia is set up as a place where it's extremely difficult to get heard – to get taken seriously and to change society – if you don't have white European roots.

The first Indigenous woman elected to Federal Parliament, Nova Peris and the first Muslim woman senator, that's me, were only elected to Parliament in the second decade of the 21st century. Nova Peris left Parliament after just one term. Years later, Nova revealed the extent of racism she was subjected to and that it played a big part in her decision not to return to parliament for a second term.

She said, "If you are an Aboriginal person and you challenge the status quo, you are going to be attacked."

Her story is similar to other female politicians of colour in Western countries, including the four progressive Democratic Party Congresswomen of colour in the US known as the Squad who are often targets of hate, abuse and mockery.

I see a lot of my own experiences in the attacks on these women and the silencing effect it has. I spoke about this in my first speech to the Senate:

"The reality is that my presence in the Senate is an affront to some. They are offended that people of colour, and Muslims, have the audacity to not only exist but to open our mouths and join the public debate. Some politicians call us cockroaches. Some say we are

a disease against which Australia needs vaccination. Some, if they had their way, would ban us from making Australia our home. So it is with great pride that I stand here before you, unapologetically — a brown, Muslim, migrant, feminist woman, and a Greens senator. I say 'unapologetically', because if there is one thing people with stories like mine are asked to do constantly, it is to apologise for our presence, because we are not quiet enough, not respectful enough, not thankful enough, not Australian enough."

Our country cannot be the place most of us want it to be while the threat of abuse continues to discourage people from participating in politics.

While we may see some more diverse faces on our televisions, or read their words in our newspapers, or witness them speak from more important positions of power in our society, the system is still very much stacked against us. The most generous assessment I can offer is that while some progress has been made, we have a very long way to go.

Just have a look at the institution that I sit within, the Federal Parliament. Out of the 227 current members, only a handful of us are people of colour or First Nations people. This is all while people of colour — that is, Australians with a non-European ethnic background — constitute about one-quarter of the Australian population. We have an incredibly diverse society that has grown in size and diversity since the abolition of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s.

But here's the thing. Proportionally, if Australians of colour had our representative share of seats in Parliament, that one-quarter would translate to federal parliamentary representation of more than 50 MPs of colour. Fifty MPs.

That group of 50 MPs is almost an unthinkable notion, when you picture in your mind the current cohort of the Australian political class, and in particular who makes up the frontbench of the incumbent government.

Let's be clear: I am proud to be part of a party where our federal Party Room is 60 per cent women with half of them being Black and Brown women. But this representation is in no way reflected throughout the rest of the Parliament.

Put simply, the Australia I see inside my current workplace is radically different to the Australia I live in — the streets and suburbs that I walk every day. Much has been said over the past 12 months or so — very fairly, and very honestly — about Parliament as an institutionally sexist place. I would add that it is an institutionally racist place, as well.

An under-acknowledged part of the Kate Jenkins review of Commonwealth Parliamentary Workplaces released late last year considered the experiences of Parliament for people of colour. The report shares some extremely telling insights into our experiences.

I'll read out a few short excerpts to illustrate it. "Participants shared that identifying in this way, or as otherwise different from the norm in these workplaces, is inherently unsafe. These participants

identified a need to increase diversity to neutralise the impact of this and reduce the potential for people to be 'targets.'"

Another participant from a parliamentary department reflected on, "a clear indication given to me by my colleagues, peers and managers that I don't belong here and that this isn't a (physically or psychologically) safe space for me, being a young woman of colour".

"A number of participants told the Commission that 'even raising issues of racism or the intersectionality of racism and sexism within my workplace kind of initiates a very aggressive response'. Participants reflected that this contributed to their sense of a lack of psychological safety and unwillingness to report misconduct, given the risk of further ostracism."

All of this is to say that Parliament is not a safe place for people of colour. A small number of us may be part of the institution, but because of our tiny representation and the toxic culture of the place, it is not a welcoming environment. The impacts are significant.

There is layer upon layer of power, privilege and hierarchy above us to push through just to raise our heads above the parapet, and then we have to muster up the courage to speak up. Then we are told — either explicitly, or implicitly — to be quiet and grateful that we have made it to where we are.

The eye rolls, the finger wagging, the ridicule that happens every time you talk about racism is enough to make me police my own behaviour to not be too loud, too grateful, too outspoken to avoid further abuse. The reactions we face when expressing our freedom of speech gate keep what we can and can't say.

Racism and speech

I have to say, this situation was something of a shock to me when I was first elected as a state MP in NSW Parliament in 2013 and it only got worse when I got to the Senate some three and a half years ago. I did not expect this of Australia.

You see, growing up in Pakistan, a place which was once colonised by the British, the narrative that had filtered down to me was that of wealthy Western countries being places where everyone was treated with the same dignity and respect.

Since migrating to Australia in 1992, I quickly realised the fallacy of my assumptions as I learnt more about the treatment of First Nations people. The violence of dispossession and colonisation was still rooted in law enforcement, societal attitudes and institutional systems resulting in death and discrimination of First Nations people. These same structures have led to Islamophobia, bigotry and the rise of the far-right in this country.

Arriving in Parliament and thrown into the public eye made clear to me, in no uncertain terms, that Australia has deep, unresolved and systemic problems with race and racism.



Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi

As I touched on earlier, one of racism's impacts is to silence its targets. To make us feel so small and think we have nothing of value to contribute. And when that person does speak up, to make sure that what they are saying is ignored, ridiculed or attacked.

Even our responses to racism are policed. To even talk about racism lands you a full-page attack piece in a daily newspaper.

I go into much more detail about this in my memoir and manifesto, but I'll illustrate in a few examples what this looks like for me in my work.

My colleagues get my name wrong all the time. In a public Senate hearing, I had to patiently correct then senator Ian Macdonald several times. He kept pronouncing it incorrectly anyway.

Even worse was the time the MP Craig Kelly, during a community meeting in Parliament, mispronounced my name and then told the room full of people like me from the sub-continent that "we should have simple names".

But I wish that was as bad as it gets. In the NSW Parliament one day, when I was speaking about the government's irrational exuberance in expanding coal mining, one MP commented that I should cook with cow dung as a million families do in the subcontinent. Another accused me of using "terrorist sorts of tactics" when I was raising a procedural point.

More recently, while speaking in the Senate on the Christchurch mosque shootings – a subject of immense personal significance and seriousness to my community – one Liberal senator repeatedly

screamed over me that the terrorist was "a socialist". Put to one side that this completely dismisses what the final report of the New Zealand Royal Commission which found that "extreme right-wing Islamophobic ideology" motivated the terrorist. It was extraordinary to have a fellow Senator shouting this mistruth at the only Muslim representative in the Senate at a time when I was mourning the massacre of 51 innocent Muslims by an Australian man.

It's galling that MPs feel so comfortable in the chambers of Parliament to fling racism and abuse across the aisle, safe in the knowledge that most of the time, Hansard doesn't record their interjections.

Of course, when speech is held to account, it's usually to silence those who try to hold racism accountable. This type of situation typifies the different rules built into our society which allow free speech for some, but not for others.

Recently, I had to formally withdraw a comment I had made in the Senate chamber describing a fellow senator's conduct as racist. But that same senator had been given free rein in a senate committee hearing to question Chinese-Australians' loyalty to this country on the basis of their cultural background. Only one of us faced consequences for what we had said.

Racism is rarely punished. But those who call out racism – we cop it frequently. We are the one's gaslighted. We are the ones accused of causing division and told to shut up, as if it's not racism that is the problem, but us calling it out.

Hate speech

Perhaps one of the most revealing and alarming aspects of debates about freedom of speech in Australia is that they tend to be dominated by those who already have an enormous platform, and enormous privilege by virtue of who they are.

In other words, those who are the fastest to jump up and down about their freedom of speech being infringed are often those who have the least to worry about. And it is their free speech concerns that are prioritised.

It remains a point of national shame, in my view, that perhaps the longest and most arduous political debate about free speech over the last decade has involved conservative, white male politicians trying to water down the section of the Racial Discrimination Act which makes it unlawful to offend, insult, humiliate or intimidate someone on the basis of their race.

For years, we had seemingly endless discussions about section 18C — its operation, its application to particular News Corp columnists, its utility in a supposedly non-racist society. Fortunately, it was all for nought, as the campaigns failed on two separate occasions under two prime ministers.

But it did reveal a certain cultural anxiety among the privileged that their views are perhaps no longer as palatable or acceptable in a diverse community as they once might have been. Or at least, if they express an offensive view, someone might actually do or say something to call them out on it.

And it was very instructive that the parliamentary inquiry set up to consider section 18C was called the 'Freedom of speech in Australia' inquiry. As if no other free speech issue held a candle to the "right to be a bigot", as it was put by the then-Attorney General.

Meanwhile, public servants have been sacked for anonymous tweets; over-the-top defamation laws continue to protect the powerful from fair criticism; and whistleblowers are refused protection for the supposed crime of exposing misconduct in our institutions. In Australia, it seems the right to express racism is far more important than anything else.

Defending hate speech in the name of free speech has resulted in a corrosive, abusive culture, especially online. Hate speech isn't a theoretical discussion about free speech for me and many others. Online hate speech has real world consequences for people, their safety, mental health and that of their families.

While there were many political and cultural reasons for the excruciating debate about racial hate speech, one thing is clear. The overwhelming whiteness of our political class has had inevitable consequences for what issues take up political space, and what issues facing communities of colour are dismissed or even quashed.

Cancel culture

While the debate over section 18C has died down over the last few years, we have seen a renewed

and related emerging debate in the form of cultural anxiety about so-called 'cancel culture'. This is the new right-wing bogeyman for a supposed intolerance for ideological or political differences that is held by the progressive left. This intolerance, it is argued, is punishing good people who may have said or done something that they now regret, or simply hold a different view and have been unfairly targeted and stigmatised because of it.

I'm going to be upfront about my view on this. I think it's a load of crap. The only 'cancel culture' in our society is one that targets the already marginalised. It's one that forced a young Muslim woman to flee the country and move overseas after posting a seven word tweet about Anzac Day, for instance.

The right's confected outrage over cancellation is little more than an attempt to retain some sort of power over the terms of debate when minorities and their allies muster the courage to speak up and try to inject their own voices into the political conversation, often simply defending their own right to exist.

To illustrate this, let's examine perhaps the most prominent recent case study of a person whose supporters have tried to play the 'cancel culture' card during this election campaign.

Warringah Liberal candidate Katherine Deves was always going to be a controversial selection. She was an open anti-trans activist. Her advocacy was known, and her abhorrent views on trans people had already been expressed in the public domain when the Liberals preselected her for a winnable seat that they had held until 2019: a former prime minister's seat.

Just in the last few years, trans people have been more public and vocal about their right to exist. Organisations and governments have shifted – incrementally, it must be said – to accommodate and acknowledge the fact that gender diversity is part and parcel of the human condition.

The community backlash was predictable, but it was also, in my view, entirely justified. Transgender people are some of the most marginalised in our country. Young transgender people face enormous stigmatisation and are at much higher risk of serious mental health concerns, self-harm and suicide than their peers.

Just in the last few years, trans people have been more public and vocal about their right to exist. Organisations and governments have shifted – incrementally, it must be said – to accommodate and acknowledge the fact that gender diversity is part and parcel of the human condition.

Sports codes have drawn up guidelines. The medical profession has dedicated resources to trans health. Schools are working out how to accommodate trans students.



Senator Dr Mehreen Faruqi

Within this shift, of course there will be different views about how best to support trans people and what that means for cisgender people as well. But Deves' comments expressed about trans people as a campaigner against trans inclusion were completely abhorrent and bigoted.

When predictably asked about this on the campaign trail, Prime Minister Scott Morrison did not condemn Deves. On the contrary, he said: "What I won't allow is for those who are seeking to cancel Katherine simply because she has a different view to them on the issue of women and girls in sport."

He said: "I'm not going to allow her to be silenced, I'm not going to allow her to be pushed aside as the pile-on comes in to try and silence her".

For him, from where I sit, there was not a thought for those who have been hurt by hearing what the Government's preferred member of Parliament for Warringah had to say about them and their community. It was about, at a fundamental level, her right to be a bigot.

And putting aside what the Prime Minister's personal response was: for all the talk of cancellation, what has actually happened to Katherine Deves?

She remains the Liberal candidate for Warringah. She is out campaigning and is on the ballot paper on Saturday. She was granted a sympathetic, front-page interview with the Sydney Morning Herald last week. Regardless of what happens on Election Day, she will be just fine.

Cancel culture, as the right characterises it, is a fiction. Supporters of equality and for the rights of the marginalised spoke up – as they are entitled to do. They held Deves accountable. She was rightly called out for her bigoted comments. The Prime Minister responded shamefully, as he often does. And the world moved on. Because the Katherine Deveses and Scott Morrisons of the world – white, well-off, well-connected – hold the institutional power. They are not the ones whose freedom of speech we should be worried about – particularly when they have expressed such vile hatred.

Where free speech is actually threatened

Confected conservative outrage on the right about cancel culture serves to distract us from the real free speech violations impacting writers and communicators in perilous circumstances both in Australia and across the world.

Many of you would be familiar with the story of Behrouz Boochani. Behrouz is a writer and journalist who fled Iran in 2013 following military raids on the office of the magazine he co-founded, after a long period of being watched by the Iranian government. Some of his colleagues were arrested and imprisoned, and he ended up fleeing the country. Behrouz was intercepted on his boat journey to Australia and taken to Christmas Island initially, and then to Manus.

He was incarcerated by Australia for seven years, and wrote about his experiences and the unspeakable

horrors of it, laboriously on a mobile phone. The Saturday Paper aptly described it as “Boochani has defied and defeated the best efforts of Australian governments to deny asylum seekers a face and a voice.”

The recent violent killing of Al Jazeera journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by Israeli armed forces is a horrific loss and a stark reminder of the silencing of those who speak for justice for Palestine. It has been reported that dozens of Palestinian journalists have been killed since 2000, with many others injured or targeted.

In the United States, there is an ongoing culture war about so-called critical race theory in schools, which Pauline Hanson's One Nation and members of the right-wing of the Liberal Party have tried to import into Australia during debates about the National Curriculum. In the US, hyping up parental fears about what is being discussed in classrooms has led to literal book-bannings and extreme curtailments on what teachers can and can't say in schools about issues such as race and sexuality. Lists of banned books disproportionately include those written by authors of colour.

The functionality and legitimacy of a democracy is dependent on the freedom of the press – and the freedom of all writers to express their views, critique government policy and report honestly on what is happening in the world. But so many examples tell us how far away we are from this reality, even in places that consider themselves beacons of democracies and free speech. It's pretty obvious that freedom of speech is very conditional on who you are and what you say.

Where to from here

In a country where the “right to be a bigot” can be more important than the right to live free of racism, transphobia and discrimination, what can we do to make sure voices holding hate to account are not silenced? What can we actually do to ensure justice?

Firstly, we must strive for diverse representation at all levels of our society – from Parliament down. There is power in numbers, and the stronger representation of diverse experiences and worldviews will play a role in shielding all of us from the worst forms of racism and bigotry.

It will protect our right to be heard, not silenced, and it will help us call out the hate speech that is flung our way, without being accused of playing the race card.

Political parties have a significant role to play in all of this. This work is everyone's responsibility, and every political party can do better.

Second, we must be clear about who is responsible for promoting the voices of the powerful and vilifying the rest of us who dare to call them out. Media, like News Corp, has been the flag bearer for dog-whistling and flagrant racism.

We must act with our feet. I've said from day one of my federal parliamentary career that I will never participate in an interview on Sky News Australia. I've never pitched, and I've rejected or ignored every single

request from them. That is because in my view, Sky is an anti-democratic organisation with a malicious agenda, that aside from being responsible for a long list of awful racist incidents, has as its principal political objective the normalisation and validation of far-right ideas. It sees our evolving multicultural democracy as a threat to the white patriarchal order that has run this country more or less since colonisation. Viewers, advertisers and guests who are concerned about democracy, human rights and discrimination should walk away from such media.

Third, we must actively support the excellent work of writers, groups and publications that are promoting diverse voices and ensuring we are part of the conversation. Groups like Sweatshop in Western Sydney, the advocacy group Media Diversity Australia, and even sections of some mainstream media organisations that are investing in diverse writers and giving voice to their stories and perspectives, should be applauded and financially supported. That means more than a pat on the head. It means proper platforms and being taken seriously – especially when their views might challenge the orthodoxy of the white status quo.

In my life, I've always tried to speak truth to power and speak honestly about my own experiences. All of us should be free to do this, if we wish. But I know that I'm often ignored, and I know that there are forces at work that are aimed at stifling me.

Those of us who care about freedom of expression and living in a democratic society need to seriously invest time and effort to ensure the marginalised in our community have a voice, and the right to free speech isn't misconstrued and weaponised by the powerful as their right alone to hang onto their cultural and political power. This is a big task, but it is a critical one.

I'd like to finish by reading out one of my favourite verses in Urdu from a poem by Pakistani writer Faiz Ahmed Faiz who was imprisoned for four years. He was a member of the Communist Party and wrote on the plight of workers and on human rights abuses across the world, from apartheid in South Africa to human rights violations in Palestine.

Bol, ke labh aazaad hain tere

Bol, zubaan ab tak teri hai

Tera sutwaan jism hai tera

Bol, ke jaan ab tak teri hai

The essence of this verse is the duty to resist, to speak up and to speak the truth, no matter our circumstances.

Being a senator gives me the immense privilege of having a platform, despite the many limitations because of who I am. I intend to use it to speak out, to be as loud as I can against injustice and to amplify voices that seek justice, whoever or wherever they are.

There is never an excuse for attacking someone for who they are

When Pauline Hanson told Mehreen Faruqi to “piss off back to Pakistan” in September, she managed to pack a whole lot of what’s wrong with Australian politics into a single sentence, according to Dr Faruqi.

“I can’t tell you how many hundreds of times I’ve been told to go back to where I come from. Everyone who looks like me has copped it at one point or another, but I can tell you the hurt and sorrow you feel hearing it never lessens.

It’s made worse by the sheer volume of hate whipped up because far-right figures have social media hordes at their beck and call. Comments like Hanson’s aren’t just one-off cracks at someone they dislike – they’re a signal to their followers, who dutifully pile onto the target.

In the aftermath of Hanson’s tweet responding to my criticism of the British Monarchy, I received hundreds of abusive calls, emails, tweets, and comments, which said things like “people will piss on your grave”, “I will cheer when you die,” “all you pricks are an enemy of our country,” and, predictably, dozens of variations of “f-k off back to where you came from”.

Of course there’s going to be disagreement about the Queen’s legacy in the wake of her passing. Conflict will always be a part of political debate on such important issues.

But there’s never an excuse for attacking someone for who they are. We must not confuse discrimination with debate.

I decided to move a censure motion against Pauline Hanson in the Senate, because racism must be called out and our Parliament – of all places – should have zero tolerance for discrimination. But when the motion was debated, it was watered down by Labor and the Liberals, who removed the part of the motion which actually censured Senator Hanson for what she had said.

This was extremely disappointing. It would be hard to find a workplace where someone would get away with such behaviour towards a colleague, yet in the highest office in this country, there were no repercussions for this anti-migrant slur. Unless we call things for what they are, and name and shame those who perpetrate racism, nothing will ever change.

Some people argue that it’s better to let these things go, or ignore them; that we only give people a platform to spout further hate when we respond to them. Why are the targets of racism expected to stay silent? Why are we expected to become resilient and just let this abuse and hate slide? Why are we called to order rather than the perpetrators? Well, I for one am not going to ignore it or feign indifference. I am unapologetic about calling out racism, challenging it and demanding action to dismantle it.

I am now pursuing a racial discrimination complaint with the Human Rights Commission because racism takes an immense toll on our health and wellbeing, and those responsible for inflicting this harm must be held to account.

At the very least, I want a public apology and a retraction from Senator Hanson, acknowledging the harm her words have caused – not only to me, but to the many migrants across this country who have been told to ‘go back where they came from’ throughout their lives here. So many have told me how triggered they felt after hearing such words again.

While this is underway, Parliament is currently developing new codes of conduct for parliamentarians, staff and parliamentary workplaces. It’s critical these codes are strong on protecting diversity, explicitly prohibit racism, and come with real consequences and accountability for not adhering to them. We cannot continue on with a blindspot as far as racism is concerned.

Politicians should also be required to undertake mandatory anti-racism training. Training like this can certainly help people unpack white privilege, identify how racial discrimination and harassment manifests, inform the workplace’s response to racism, and encourage people to be better allies.

Ultimately we need to unwind the systems and structures of discrimination that prop up the racially disparate society we live in, and which perpetuate cycles of harm against First Nations people and people of colour.

This whole ordeal has been one of the hardest things I’ve had to deal with. Receiving and exposing hate is exhausting. It does grind you down.

But I have been heartened by hundreds of messages of support, many from people who have faced the sear of racism and want to see discrimination called out, held to account and eradicated. I’m with them. Together, we can build an anti-racist Australia. Everyone has the right to live without fear of racism, abuse and discrimination”.

When blasphemous libel is still a common law misdemeanour

“Allah is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed Bhagwan” – **Sami Shah**, by way of Friedrich Nietzsche.

It should be safe for me to write that. It's just words after all. At best, it's a bit of harmless satire, remixing the words of a great philosopher to challenge the beliefs of billions of people who put faith in higher powers. At worst, it's a provocation but not in the form of a gun, or a bomb, or a fist — not even a blade aimed at inflicting four wounds to the stomach area of the abdomen, three wounds to the right side of the front part of the neck, one wound to the right eye, one wound to the chest and one wound to the right thigh.

Those specific injuries, by the way, are what were suffered by Salman Rushdie at the hands of a man motivated by a hatred of free speech. Despite the best efforts of the attacker, Rushdie is still alive. Despite the best efforts of rational-minded people, blasphemy still remains a crime in many places around the world. It's a crime in my native Pakistan, where multiple people have been killed by mobs and by courts every year.

In fact, in a 2019 analysis by the Pew Research Centre, 40 per cent of the 198 countries studied had laws or policies banning affronts to religion. Not every place indulges the powers afforded by those laws, but they do exist, hanging like guillotine blades over the neck of free speech.

Australia is not immune to the grotesque existence of blasphemy laws either. This comes as a shock to many people whenever I bring it up (which I admittedly do entirely too often), but the vestigial stumps of more stringent prosecution for blasphemy still remains in some parts of Australia.

According to the Crimes Act 1900 which still governs New South Wales, blasphemous libel is still a common law misdemeanour. The last successful prosecution was in 1871 (when an elderly man was found guilty of saying the Old Testament was quite immoral and was sentenced to two years in gaol).

In Victoria, blasphemy is also still a common law offence, last used in 1919 to punish a satirist to six months of hard labour (something satirists avoid at all times). It's also still on the books in South Australia, The Northern Territory, and the Australian Capital Territory.

These laws are old and forgotten, until they're not. They were forgotten in Ireland until someone tried using them against Stephen Fry in 2017, and in England their last weaponisation was against comedian Stewart Lee's *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. These cases came to



Sami Shah

naught, and the laws summoned in their indulgence were considered, rightfully, to be embarrassments from a bygone era, and quick referendums removed them entirely. Why not do the same here?

I, of course, do not think Australians are under any risk of being punished for blasphemy by the courts. For now. A few years ago, I was accused of blasphemy (which I happily admit I did commit), after I published a book that detailed my personal opinions of Islam. The threats came largely from foreign countries, including my homeland of Pakistan. However, there were also enough promises of violence for me to have to hide and cancel all public appearances.

At the time, having just learned of the commons laws still available for those sensitive to blasphemy in Victoria, I did wonder whether anyone would bother using them. However, the greater danger was still posed by the kind of self-motivated lunatic who stabbed Salman Rushdie. Against people like that we will never have enough defences. And, despite our vulgar defamation laws — which I and any other satirist in this country are more likely to have our speech curbed by — Australia does maintain a commitment to free speech. However, the mere existence of such common law ghosts is still offensive to any who believe in that fundamental right to question religion and the corrosive influence it has on society.

It is time to be done with them. All the gods are dead. Now let's make their murder legal.

Sami Shah is a comedian, journalist and PEN member.



Origins of Blasphemy Day

Blasphemy Day, also known as International Blasphemy Day or International Blasphemy Rights Day, educates individuals and groups about blasphemy laws and defends freedom of expression, especially the open criticism of religion which is criminalised in many countries. Blasphemy Day was introduced as a worldwide celebration by the Center for Inquiry in 2009.

Blasphemy Day is celebrated on September 30 to coincide with the anniversary of the 2005 publication of satirical drawings of Muhammad in one of Denmark's newspapers, resulting in the Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy. Although the caricatures of Muhammad caused some controversy within Denmark, especially among Muslims, it became a widespread furore after Muslim imams in several countries stirred up violent protests in which Danish embassies were firebombed and over 100 people killed (counting the deaths from police opening fire on protesters).

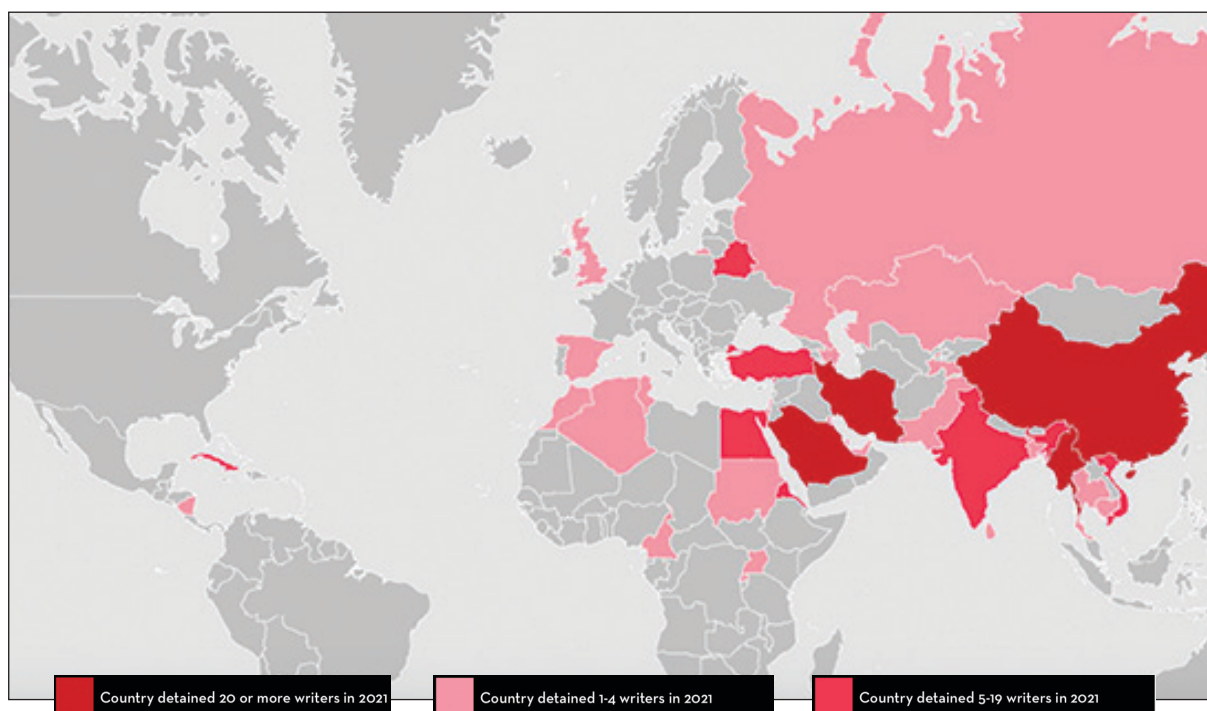
The idea to observe an International Blasphemy Rights Day originated in 2009. A student contacted the Center for Inquiry in Amherst, New York, to present the idea, which CFI then supported.

In some countries, blasphemy is punishable by death, such as in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Nine member states of the European Union have laws against blasphemy or religious insult: Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Poland, Portugal, and Spain. In addition, blasphemy has recently been repealed in a number of other countries: Denmark (repealed 2017), France (Alsace-Moselle region only, repealed in January 2017), Iceland (repealed 2015), Ireland (ended January 2020), and Malta (ended 2016).

In 2009 six US states still had anti-blasphemy laws on their books: Massachusetts, Michigan, South Carolina, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming, but law professor Sarah Barringer Gordon states that they are "rarely enforced".

Freedom of expression deteriorated globally during the pandemic



Graphic courtesy of Freedom House.

2020 was an extraordinary year in which the global COVID-19 pandemic brought much of the world to a halt – with horrific death tolls and lives blighted by loss, disease and enforced isolation. PEN International documents in detail the challenges presented to writers and those who use the written word to express themselves in their attempts to speak out under the most difficult of circumstances.

Measures aimed at curtailing the disease were a necessity, with widespread closures of schools, shops, workplaces, theatres and public spaces. The wearing of masks and 'social distancing', quarantines, and self isolation became mandatory, often enforced by law.

UNESCO, in a review of the pandemic year published in December 2020, recorded that around 80 states had enacted emergency legislation to tackle the spread of the virus. In some countries these laws, either through hasty implementation or by design, criminalised journalists and others whose commentary on the virus ran counter to the official line.

The media rights watchdog, Reporters Without Borders, reported that at least 125 journalists in 29 countries had been attacked in COVID-19 related incidents by the end of the year. Maybe unsurprisingly, authoritarian governments saw the pandemic as an opportunity to further stifle their already troublesome critics.

In China, for example, the pretext of coronavirus prevention checks was used to gain access to the home of a dissident writer who was then arrested. In Uganda, a writer was charged under COVID-19 regulations soon after he had published books that criticised corruption and human rights abuses.

Restrictions on public gatherings meant that the opportunity to protest was severely curtailed. In some countries, liaison between police and protestors enabled demonstrations while practicing COVID-19 safety precautions, while in others these regulations were taken to extremes.

In Zimbabwe, for example, a writer and another friend staged a two-person protest criticising the government. Although both wore masked and were walking in a largely empty street, they were arrested for breaking COVID-19 regulations.

Insult and defamation laws have long been used to suppress criticism of governments, and in some countries COVID-19 regulations have entered

this realm. In Kuwait these new laws extended to commentary that “weakens the prestige of the state”. In Lebanon there was a crackdown on online content deemed insulting to the President and threats to open investigations into possible defamation crimes linked to the pandemic. In Iran newspaper staff were arrested for insulting the country’s leadership in a cartoon that suggested that Ayatollah Ali Khamanei recommended fake remedies for the virus.

Across world regions, digital communication came under increased control with new laws and tighter regulations linked to COVID-19. Freedom House reported that at least 28 countries blocked websites or forced users to delete information such as on unfavourable health statistics, criticism of government handling of the crisis or other content on the virus. These countries included China, Belarus, Venezuela, Egypt, India and Hungary. Digital blackouts where the virus is dominant or in areas of conflict are especially dangerous, denying access to vital public health information such as in Myanmar and in Ethiopia.

Despite lockdowns and restrictions, 2020 was a year of mass demonstrations on issues such as flawed elections, police brutality and other rights violations. Many thousands took to the streets in countries including Belarus, Uganda, Nigeria, Tanzania and the USA. These protests were met with detentions, more police violence, bans on social media and attacks on the press. In Belarus hundreds of protestors, including writers and artists, were arrested.

Running alongside new arrests and restrictions, are long-term cases that are often forgotten as global attention switches to more recent events. Notably in China where there are seven writers who have been in prison for more than five years, with one held since 2005.

Writers are among the thousands of people who have been taken to detention camps in Xinjiang since 2017, and whose whereabouts remain unknown. In Turkey, several writers and over 40 journalists who were arrested between 2009 and 2010 and who spent periods in prison before being released on trial, are now entering the tenth year of court hearings with no end in sight.

One of the most disturbing situations is in Eritrea where five writers have been held since 2001 and now are entering their twentieth year in prison, with their whereabouts unknown: it is unclear if they are still alive. It is important that these cases are not forgotten.

COVID-19 has hit prisons particularly hard with overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and lack of medical attention in many countries, with writers held in jails in Iran and India contracting the virus. In Iran and Turkey, where there are high numbers of writers and journalists in prison, government concern about the prevalence of the virus led to the release of many thousands of prisoners - 54,000 in Iran and 90,000 in Turkey. However, in both countries, political prisoners including writers, were excluded.

In addition, a knock-on effect of the virus has been delays in trial hearings, adding to already tortuously slow judicial processes. This has also meant a longer wait for justice for the families of murdered writers whose alleged killers are before the courts.

More than 30 journalists killed in 2020

In the pandemic year there were no reported murders of writers. However the killings of journalists continued unabated, with the Committee to Protect Journalists recording at least 32 killed in 2020.

Twenty-two had been singled out in retaliation for their reporting, double the number for 2019. Mexico and Afghanistan were cited as the deadliest countries in which to be a reporter. This creates a pall of fear over anyone who speaks out, from all sectors of society.

PEN International joined its colleagues in protesting and calling for justice for journalists killed in Afghanistan and Mexico, as well as continuing to call for full justice for journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, murdered in Malta in 2017.

PEN joined the world- wide condemnation of the execution of exiled journalist Ruholla Zam in Iran in December, a year after he had been abducted from Iraq. PEN International also joined the outrage at the COVID-19 related death in prison in May 2020 of Egyptian film-maker, Shady Habash.

■ Imprisoned again

A message from a daughter about her imprisoned mother

PEN International strongly condemns the arrest of Baha'i poet Mahvash Sabet by the Iranian authorities and calls for her immediate and unconditional release. PEN International has raised serious concerns over Sabet's health amid the continued prevalence of Covid-19 infections in prisons and deliberate medical negligence by the Iranian authorities. Her daughter **Negar Sabet** tells her story.

I am the daughter of Mahvash Sabet, who shared the 2017 PEN Pinter Prize with Irish poet Michael Longley and was named the 2017 PEN International Writer of Courage. I am also the daughter of the most courageous, resilient and peaceful woman I have ever known. And I am a mother, deeply missing my own mother since she was imprisoned in Iran for the third time in 17 years only because she is a Baha'i.

As the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran, Baha'is endure relentless and continuous state-sponsored persecution solely because of their religious beliefs. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, more than 200 Baha'is have been executed. To this day, Baha'is continue to endure relentless psychological pressure and harassment by Iranian authorities. They are subjected to arbitrary raids on their homes and businesses in which personal belongings are taken away, forced to endure cycles of arrests and excessive bail amounts, spend months or even years waiting to be called to Court, and are often arbitrarily detained and imprisoned.

The first time my mother was arrested was on 25 May, 2005. It was my wedding day. I had left our home in the morning to get ready for my big day. I returned to a ransacked house, our wedding guests crying, and the devastating absence of my mother. The Iranian authorities had been waiting outside for me to leave before breaking in and taking my mother handcuffed in front of all the guests who were staying with our family. They later told my mother that they had waited for that day for a long time. As part of a calculated plan, they deliberately timed the raid to ruin our special day, create the worst memory and maximise our suffering. My mother was released two months after this incident.

In 2007, mum joined what was known as the "Yaran," or "Friends" of Iran, an ad-hoc informal leadership group of the Baha'is in Iran. From overseeing burials to marriages, the Yaran tended to the basic pastoral needs of the Baha'i community and did so with the full knowledge and acceptance of the Iranian authorities at the time.



Poet Mahvash Sabet

In March 2008, my mother was summoned to the city of Mashhad by the Ministry of Intelligence to answer questions related to the burial of an individual in a Baha'i cemetery in that city (Baha'i cemeteries in Iran are often destroyed or vandalised due to the government's systematic persecution of Baha'is).

Mum was arrested right away. She was placed in solitary confinement for nine months and spent a year behind bars without access to legal counsel. In 2010, the seven Yaran members were tried and convicted with charges of "espionage" and "spreading propaganda against the regime". Initially, they were each sentenced to 20 years in prison – the longest given to any current prisoner of conscience in Iran.



Negar Sabet with her mother Mahvash during a visit the poet made to Australia in 2019

Mum was finally released in 2018. It was during her decade in prison that she began writing poetry. Her poems – often written on one ply tissues because she lacked regular access to paper – were later published in English under the title “Prison Poems”, and earned her recognition as an English PEN International Writer of Courage in 2017.

It was the last day of July 2022 when mum was arrested for the third time, along with two former Yaran colleagues who had each spent a decade in gaol themselves. At the time of her arrest, Mum was quite ill with Covid – so ill, in fact, that she was away from home and was being looked after by family members in a different city. The government agents nonetheless tracked her movements and arrested her in one city while also raiding our home and taking our belongings in another.

It breaks my heart to acknowledge the pain my family has to go through all over again. It hurts to imagine the bloodcurdling torture she will likely endure yet again. It brings tears to my eyes seeing my nearly year-old baby growing up while my mum misses all of her life’s milestones. Amid travel challenges, my mum used say she only had a grandchild on WhatsApp. But now she can’t even enjoy that.

As painful as this is, I strongly believe that she is missing this and us for a more important cause – for the mission fate has put on her way. Separate to my mother’s arrest, Iran is experiencing a significant women-led uprising. Iranians are being arrested, imprisoned, and tortured. My compatriots have even

lost their lives in their quest for human rights and freedom. I believe that my mother has a significant role in this historic moment. To me, fate has placed her in prison to be a mother for all of these young people who are now confined in one of the most dreadful spots in Iran, Evin prison.

Iranian Baha’is pose no threat to the government: they are not aligned with any political ideology or opposition movement, nor do they engage in subversive activity or violence. Baha’is see Iran as their home and where they are rooted. Yet my mother has spent more than a decade of her life in various prisons. She has survived almost a year of solitary confinement and horrible torture.

She has devoted her life to selfless service to others and knows well the fear and faith experienced on this path. Though unjustly held in captivity, she is now a mother to all the young people in Evin; she is there to welcome them, console them, and to be a salve for their wounds. She is a mother of Iran.

Always With Me

Why it is that despite its reels and shakes
the topsy-turvy world here cannot cause
this throbbing heart of mine to ache?

Why is it that despite the siren’s shrill of fear
its anguish cannot reach the boundaries
of my blood, as I lie here?

Why is it that I’m disinclined even to dream
of violence, and my tongue, normally so sharp,
can say no ill, and thus is rendered dumb?

And how is that despite years in this cell
And all the routine habits of this prison mill
I do not feel that I am really here at all?

You are with me
you are always with me
you are thriving in my heart, alive within me.

If I have not yet died here it is because
they cannot take from me what I shall never lose.

Mahvash Sabet

The Getting of Wisdom: Finding your own teachers

When will I stop feeling like a beginner, asks award-winning writer **Charlotte Wood** in this chapter from her book *The Luminous Solution*.

This question used to plague me about my work. When would I gain some confidence? At what point would I finally know how to do it? Practice is supposed to make progress, if not perfect, but each time I began a new book I was filled with the certain knowledge that I had no idea how to proceed. Nine books in, I still feel this way. This is not an original observation—many writers say every new book sends them back to bewilderment—but it took me a long time to realise that, despite its inherent anxieties, this horrible state of unknowing was not a sign things were going badly, but rather indicated that I was on the right track.

Philip Roth described this as ‘looking for trouble’. Real problems arose, he said, ‘not because the writing is difficult, but because it isn’t difficult enough. Fluency can be a sign that nothing is happening . . . while being in the dark from sentence to sentence is what convinces me to go on.’

The solitary artist struggling in the dark, fumbling towards the light. While I recognise the fundamental truth of this lone struggle, it’s also an image I want to resist, because the idea that complete isolation is a permanent necessity is also a lie, helping promote some destructive mythologising about the artist’s natural state. For every solitary genius waiting for a personal illuminating flash, there are a great many solitary non-geniuses growing lonelier and more creatively stagnant by the darkening hour.

Sometimes I think the high rates of depression and anxiety among writers — and they are high — are helped along by the pernicious myth that to be any good you must always work in desolate isolation.

It’s one of many damaging ideas about creativity we’ve been fed for generations, largely by the patriarchy. Women’s art making has always been more porous than most men’s to the outside world. Male geniuses have had women to cook their food, raise their children and do their laundry (hello, Thoreau) while, like working women everywhere, female artists have done all that and made their own work too. This could be why I have such an aversion to the word ‘muse’ — I’ve almost never heard women artists talk about muses, which bring to mind images of winsome girls, decorative and docile slaves to the towering male art figure. Art

history is strewn with talented ‘muses’ whose own creativity was subsumed and diminished by that of their more famous lovers. It makes me so sad to think of all that unexplored potential, all that Great Art unmade, overlooked, abandoned.

But porousness in itself need not necessarily harm the work, nor subtract from one’s pleasure in making it. On the contrary, in my experience. Many of the most profound moments of my creative life have come in talking about the process with fellow practitioners, in learning and sharpening my craft in company with others and, after a certain point, exposing my draft work to the generous but critical reading minds of selected peers.

Actors regularly take classes throughout their careers, and painters visit each other’s studios to show and discuss their work in progress, so it’s a mystery to me why many writers are so leery of this kind of openness. More than once, when I’ve mentioned to an established writer (and not only men, it must be said) that I’ve asked a writing friend to read a draft, or I’ve taken up a residency where I talk about work in progress, or enrolled in a masterclass or retreat, they’ve looked at me in horror and said, ‘Oh, I could never do that.’

I’ve never had the guts to ask why not, so I don’t know where this disdain comes from. Is it disdain? Sometimes it’s just snootiness, I think — the belief that a skilled practitioner should have moved beyond such baby stuff as going to writing class. At other times, I’ve had the sense they think learning from others is somehow cheating.

Perhaps they fear outside influence would contaminate their unique creative process. Or maybe they just need absolute privacy for the entire duration of a book in order that their imagination’s delicate balloon can stay aloft — a need I understand and respect.

It’s true there are risks in opening up the inner world to the external one, and the line between inspiring influence and malign interference can be blurry. But in my own work, I tend to hunger for guidance from the outside world. I’ve often completely changed tack in my approach because of a stray remark I’ve heard another artist make, and sometimes I wonder if this means I’m too skittish about my own work, too easily bored or distracted to settle properly.



Award-winning writer Charlotte Wood.
Picture by Carly Earl.

I wonder if my constant search for new ways of working is a mark of dependence on others, or an immature restlessness, stopping me from uncovering the deeper truths that might be there if I delve further into what seems at first like the same old technical ground.

That may all be true. But as novelist Michelle de Kretser has written, 'Competence is the enemy of art.' And at this point in my writing life, I seek out instruction because the danger is not that my well-oiled way of working might be disrupted; it's that it might never be disrupted again. Interference with my process, in other words, is exactly what I want.

The trouble with ordinary writing classes, though, is that they tend to be built for the early years of development and then repeat the same material. There isn't much instruction specifically designed for artists with two or three decades of experience, which is why I've been inclined to invent the sort of 'classes' I want.

Sometimes this has meant asking my peers to teach me what they know — to gather a group of mates together for a day, employing one to give the rest of us a masterclass in whatever they choose. Even if we're all at the same 'level' (whatever that means), and even when I'm sure I know all this stuff already, every single class has provoked a new idea, or reminded me of something I'd forgotten that now blazes with sudden urgency. On finishing each book, a writer is a different person, after all, and the old rules no longer necessarily apply.

At other times, my improvised tutorials have taken the shape of formal, structured conversations with other artists. I started a magazine of interviews with writers, which eventually became a book, then morphed into occasional workshops, then a podcast. After a while I began turning to other art forms as often as writing, and those allied-arts conversations have in recent times proved the most revelatory.

Painters, playwrights, sculptors, filmmakers, actors, composers — even scientists, even builders, anyone who makes something appear where nothing was before — all have something to offer the writer about creativity. For one thing, they speak about their work in completely different terms, and this alone often brings fresh surprises about the writing process. A painter might talk of 'density' or 'refraction', and suddenly I'm aware of a new structural possibility for my novel in progress.

A scientist speaks of pattern finding, but also the requirement to test and verify the pattern's solidity, and I realise I need to press harder on a recurring motif to test its strength. An actor tells me her work begins with a suspension of judgement, or points out the different body sites in which a person might carry their energy, and I have new insight into how I might enliven a character or, indeed, sustain a whole book. The accretion of these lessons over time has offered me much richer depth and scope than I can find in any writing manual.

When I later return to one of these conversations in print or podcast, I can chart the progress of the book I was writing by the questions I asked at the time, and by the tone of my response to their answers in the moment. Sometimes I wonder whether I could write at all without the transformative jolts these conversations have given me. I think the solitary genius might say that reading and living should teach a writer everything they need to know. And they'd be right. But crucial discoveries about my work have also taken place in the intelligent, inquiring company of others.

The paradox I've learned is this: every artist must protect and obey their own peculiar instincts—and, simultaneously, those very instincts must be constantly challenged and refreshed and developed.

Now I'm deep in the mess of my ninth book, that old question must I always know nothing? no longer haunts, but consoles. It's an invitation to discovery, to exploration, to lower yourself into the dark to mine for riches. Sometimes you can move into that darkness in the company of your weird, happy, melancholy, curious crew of fellow makers. You travel together until the openings of your separate tunnels appear and then you set off alone into yours, calling words of encouragement and solidarity to each other now and then. And under the floating sounds of those calls, in the soft lamplight of that comradeship, into your tunnel's earth you dig.

Charlotte Wood has won the Stella Prize, the Prime Minister's Literary Award, the Indie Book of the Year and, more recently, ABIA for Literary Fiction.

- The question of online debate

Researchers ask: Does enforcing civility stifle online debate?

Some social scientists argue that civility is a poor metric by which to judge the quality of an online debate, reports investigative journalist **Teresa Carr**.

In poll after poll, Americans say they are deeply concerned about rising incivility online. And extensive social media research has focused on how to counteract online incivility. But with Civic Signals, a project of the National Conference on Citizenship and the Center for Media Engagement, researchers took a different approach: If you started from scratch, they asked, what would a flourishing, healthy digital space look like?

They quickly realised that it wouldn't always be civil. The Civic Signals project, which began about four years ago, initially involved conducting a thorough literature review and expert interviews in the U.S. and four other countries to identify the values — or “signals” — people want reflected in the design of online spaces. The team then conducted focus groups and polled more than 22,000 people in 20 countries who were frequent users of social, search, and messaging platforms.

Gina Masullo, a professor in the School of Journalism and Media at the University of Texas at Austin, brought an expertise in incivility research to the group. But “pretty early on in the process”, she said, the team concluded that if one of the goals was to support productive political discourse, civility alone was insufficient.

“It’s not really that we are advocating for incivility,” said Professor Masullo. “But if you are going to have passionate discussion about politics, which we want in a democracy, I would argue, people are not always going to talk perfectly about it.” In her book *Nasty Talk: Online Incivility and Public Debate*, she points out that “perfect” speech can be so sanitised that we wind up saying nothing.

No one is arguing that social media companies shouldn't combat the most harmful forms of speech — violent threats, targeted harassment, racism, incitement to violence. But the artificial intelligence programs that the companies use for screening, trained using squishy and arguably naive notions of civility, miss some of the worst forms of hate. For example, research

led by Libby Hemphill, a professor in the University of Michigan's School of Information and the Institute for Social Research, demonstrated how white supremacists evade moderation by donning a cloak of superficial politeness.

“We need to understand more than just civility to understand the spread of hatred,” she said.

Even if platforms get better at hate Whac-A-Mole, if the goal is not just to profit, but also to create a digital space for productive discourse, they will need to retool how algorithms prioritise content. Research suggests that companies incentivise posts that elicit strong emotion, especially anger and outrage, because, like a wreck on the highway, these draw attention, and, crucially, more eyeballs to paid advertising. Engagement-hungry folks have upped their game accordingly, creating the toxicity that has social media users so concerned.

What people really want, the Civic Signals project found, is a digital space where they feel welcome, connected, informed, and empowered to act on the issues that affect them. In a social media world optimised for clicks, such positive experiences happen almost despite the environment's design, said Professor Masullo. “Obviously, there's nothing wrong with making money for the platforms,” she said. “But maybe you can do both, like you could also make money but as well not destroy democracy.”

As toxic as political discourse has become, it seems almost quaint that a little over a decade ago, many social scientists were hopeful that by allowing political leaders and citizens to talk directly to one another, nascent social media platforms would improve a relationship tarnished by distrust. That directness, said Yannis Theodoridis, professor of digital governance at the Technical University of Munich, “was something that made people optimistic, like me, and think that this is exactly what's going to refresh our understanding of democracy and democratic participation.”

So, what happened?

Social media brought politicians and their



Human Rights Council in session

constituents together to some extent, said Professor Theocharis, but it also gave voice to people on the margins whose intent is to vent or attack. Human nature being what it is, we tend to gravitate towards the sensational. “Louder people usually tend to get a lot of attention on social media,” he said. His research suggests that people respond more positively to information when it has a bit of a nasty edge, especially if it jibes with their political views.

And politicians have grown savvy to the rules of the game. Since 2009, tweets by members of the U.S. Congress have become increasingly uncivil, according to an April study that used artificial intelligence to analyse 1.3 million posts. Results also revealed a plausible reason why: Nastiness pays. The rudest, most disrespectful tweets garner eight times as many likes and 10 times as many retweets as civil ones.

By and large, social media users don’t approve of the uncivil posts, the researchers found, but pass them along for entertainment value. Jonathan Haidt, social psychologist at the New York University Stern School of Business, has noted that the simple design choice about a decade ago to “like” and “share” features changed the way that people provide social feedback to one another. “The newly tweaked platforms were almost perfectly designed to bring out our most moralistic and least reflective selves,” he wrote this past May in *The Atlantic*. “The volume of outrage was shocking.”

One solution to rising incivility is to run platforms like a fifth-grade classroom and force everyone to be nice. But enforcing civility in the digital public square is a fool’s errand, Professor Masullo and her Civic Signals colleagues argue in a commentary published

in the journal *Social Media + Society* in 2019. For starters, incivility turns out to be really hard to define. Social scientists use standardised artificial intelligence programs trained by humans to classify speech as uncivil based on factors such as profanity, hate speech, ALL CAPS, name calling, or humiliation. But those tools aren’t nuanced enough to moderate speech in the real world.

Profanity is the easiest way to define incivility because you can just create a search for certain words, said Professor Masullo. But only a small percentage of potentially uncivil language contains profanity, and, she added, “sexist or homophobic or racist speech is way worse than dropping an F bomb here and there.”

Plus, heated conversations aren’t necessarily bad, she said. “In a democracy you want people to discuss things. Sometimes they’re going to dip into, maybe, some incivility and you don’t want to chill robust debate at the risk of making it sanitised.” Finally, she said, when you focus on civility as the end goal, it tends to privilege those in power who get to define what’s “appropriate.”

Furthermore, civility policing arguably isn’t working particularly well. Libby Hemphill’s research as a Belfer Fellow for the Anti-Defamation League shows that moderation algorithms miss some of the worst forms of hate. Because hate speech represents such a small fraction of the vast amount of language online, machine learning systems trained on large samples of general speech typically don’t recognize it. To get around that problem, Professor Hemphill and her team trained algorithms on posts from the far-right white-nationalist website Stormfront, comparing it to alt-right

posts on Twitter and a compendium of discussions on Reddit.

In her report “Very Fine People,” she details findings showing that platforms frequently overlook discussions of conspiracy theories about white genocide and malicious grievances against Jews and people of colour. White supremacists evade moderation by avoiding profanity or direct attacks — but use distinctive speech to signal their identity to others in ways that are apparent to humans, if not algorithms. They centre their whiteness by appending “white” to many terms such as “power” and dehumanize racial and ethnic groups by using plural nouns such as Blacks, Jews, and gays.

A civil rights audit of Facebook published in 2020 concluded that the company doesn’t do enough to remove organised hate. And last October, former Facebook product manager Frances Haughen testified before a U.S. Senate Committee that the company catches 3 to 5 percent of hateful content.

But Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, disagrees. In a statement forwarded by Meta’s policy communications manager Irma Palmer, which she asked to be attributed only to a “Meta spokesperson,” the company said that “in the last quarter alone, the prevalence of hate speech was at 0.02 per cent on Facebook, down from 0.06-0.05 per cent, or 6 to 5 views of hate speech per 10,000 views of content from the same quarter the year before.” Even so, the company admitted in a follow-up statement that it will inevitably make mistakes, so it continues to invest in refining its policies, enforcement, and the tools it gives users. The company is, for example, testing strategies such as granting administrators of Facebook Groups more latitude to consider context when deciding what is and isn’t allowed in their space.

Another solution to the problem of hate and harassment online is regulation. As I have reported previously, a handful of giant for-profit companies control the digital world. In a Los Angeles Times op-ed about the efforts of Elon Musk, Tesla CEO and world’s richest person, to purchase Twitter, Safiya Noble, professor of gender studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, and Rashad Robinson, president of the racial justice organization Color of Change, pointed out that a select few people control the technology companies that affect an untold number of lives and our democracy.

“The issue is not just that rich people have influence over the public square, it’s that they can dominate and control a wholly privatised square — they’ve created it, they own it, they shape it around how they can profit from it,” they wrote. They advocate for regulations like those for the television and telecommunications industries that establish frameworks for fairness and accountability for harm.

In the absence of stricter laws, social media companies could do much more to create a space that allows people to speak their mind without devolving into harassment and hate.

In the Very Fine People report, Libby Hemphill

recommends several steps that companies could take to reduce hate speech on their platforms. First, they could consistently and transparently enforce existing rules. A broad swath of the civil rights community has criticised Facebook for not enforcing policies against hate speech, especially content targeted at African Americans, Jews, and Muslims.

Social media companies may take an economic hit and even face legal challenges when they don’t allow far-right extremists to speak, Professor Hemphill acknowledges. Texas state law HB 20 would have made it nearly impossible for social media companies to ban toxic content and misinformation. But the U.S. Supreme Court recently put that law on hold while lawsuits against the legislation work their way through the courts. If the Texas law is overturned, going forward, platforms could argue more forcefully for their own rights to moderate speech.

In the wake of the Citizens United Supreme Court ruling, which expanded corporations’ rights to free speech under the First Amendment, tech companies “can remind people that they have the right to do what they want on their platforms,” said Professor Hemphill. “Once they do that, they can start to prioritize social health metrics instead of only eyeballs.”

Like Libby Hemphill, many social scientists are making the case for platforms to create a healthier space by tweaking algorithms to de-emphasise potentially uncivil content. Companies already have tools to do this, said Professor Theocharis. They can block the sharing of a post identified as uncivil or downgrade it in users’ feeds so that fewer will people see and share it. Or as Twitter has tried, they could nudge users to rethink posting something hurtful. Professor Theocharis’ team is exploring whether such interventions work to reduce incivility.

The Civic Signals team recommends that companies focus on optimising feeds for how valuable content is for users and not just clicks. If companies changed their algorithms to prioritise so-called connective posts — that is, posts that make an argument, even using strong language, without directly attacking other people — then uncivil posts would be seen less and, therefore, shared less and would eventually fade from view, said Professor Masullo.

As for profit, she pointed out that people are unhappy with the current social media environment. If you cleaned up a public park full of rotting garbage and dog poop, she said, more people would use it.

Teresa Carr is the author of the Matters of Fact column for *Undark*, a non-profit, editorially independent online publication exploring science as a “frequently wondrous, sometimes contentious, and occasionally troubling by-product of human culture.”

The ability to read opens doors, book by book in remote Australia

Until you travel by road across Australia, it is difficult to imagine what a small remote community looks like. Some are so small they consist of just a school, a shop, and a cluster of homes, writes **Ben Bowen**, chief executive officer of the Indigenous Literacy Foundation.

Remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities share something significant in common. They have limited access to services that people living in regional and metropolitan Australia often take for granted.

One such service is access to books. A library or bookstore may be a nine-hour drive away or a 40-minute flight by a small plane. Internet services can be intermittent and online shopping is only possible if you own a credit card (not to mention the cost of postage!)

Currently the ILF runs three programs – Book Supply, Book Buzz and Community Publishing Projects – that focus on ensuring access to quality resources.

Book Buzz focuses on early literacy and supports remote playgroups with board books, books with language translations, complementary learning resources such as puppets, puzzles and toys and books in First Languages.

Zoe Cassim, the ILF Programs Manager says “It’s hard to imagine a playgroup without these books and learning resources. The value of getting mums and dads into a space to read to their little ones, to teach them how to hold a book, turn the pages, and guess what happens next, is vital for early literacy development and future reading success.”

Recently, the ILF worked with Elders and linguists to translate a well-loved nursery rhyme in five different communities, into five different languages and the children in each Community illustrated the book. Preschoolers in remote communities often speak two or more languages before they start school. English may or may not be one of them. There is abundant research to show that if children learn to read in their First Language, they have far more success learning to read in a second, third or fourth language, such as English.

The ILF’s Community Publishing Projects (CPP) support Communities to write and illustrate their own stories in languages of their choice. To date, ILF has published 143 books reflecting up to 26 Indigenous languages: from Walmajarri in the Kimberley region to Arabana in South Australia, Kriol in the Katherine region, and Tiwi in the Tiwi Islands.



Children of the Tiwi Islands with their books.
Photograph: Tiffany Parker

Another current project is the translation of several well-known titles such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Where is the Green Sheep?* into up to 10 First Languages.

The Community Publishing Projects program is growing. As remote Communities learn more about the opportunity to share their stories in books in First Languages, the Publishing team is working hard to meet requests. But it is not just ILF amplifying the value of books in First Languages. UNESCO has declared 2022-2032 the International Decade of Indigenous Languages to draw attention to the critical status of many Indigenous languages and encourage action for their preservation, revitalisation and promotion.

The Book Supply program provides culturally relevant and safe books to remote schools, community, health, and women's centres. These hubs ensure the books are put into the hands and homes of children and families. More than 48 per cent of books feature Indigenous authors and illustrators. This is important as it allows children to see themselves and their cultures reflected in the many stories in each pack.



Make a difference, join us

Sydney PEN is a branch of PEN International, a worldwide organisation which defends free expression, protects writers at risk, support writers in exile, promotes linguistic rights and promotes the written word in all its forms.

Membership fees ensure our survival as a branch as well as support the PEN international initiative. You will also be the first to hear about our events and campaigns.

Sydney PEN was founded in 1931 and over the years our organisation has boasted many prominent Australian writers as part of its membership including Thomas Keneally and the late Rosie Scott.

Join Sydney PEN or renew membership online:

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