



SYDNEY

# PEN magazine

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## The debate over words: sensible or censorship



**Are 'sensitivity readers' the new foot soldiers  
in the culture wars?**

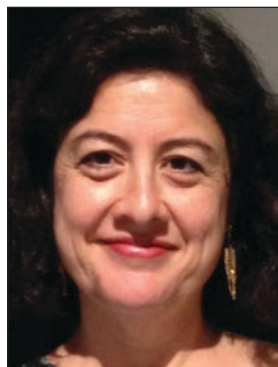
**Kylie Moore-Gilbert: staring at the prison wall**

**Behrouz breaks free with something new to say**

**Hefty new penalties now applied to protesters**

**Adamson and Petty: poet and cartoonist farewelled**

# A new initiative to focus on women writers



At the time of the International Women's Day in March, the PEN International Women Writers' Committee met online with the theme 'Know Her Words'.

Key among the Committee's activities was a panel on women writers from authoritarian and

deeply restrictive regimes who uncovered the sad experience of women under the repressive rule of Iran and Afghanistan.

We learned of the bravery of women in Iran in the wake of the death of Jina Mahsa Amini in September 2022, and the civil movement that has erupted there in the months following. Now young women are joined by older women and men in their demands of justice for Jina and rights for women in Iran. See our story by young Iran writer Sahar Delijani in this issue.

We learned through panel speaker Fazaneh Milani, who left Iran for the US five decades ago, and who has focused her academic career on feminism and literature since, that the history of debate over the wearing of the hijab is one that has been active in Iran for centuries and that it has always been about control of women and, at least recently, an attempt to silence women from the public sphere.

From Ghezal Khiaynosh, who is living in exile in Germany and who reports for us here, we learned of the increased repression of women under the Taliban rule – now banning girls from education which is the key to literacy and therefore curtailing their ability to take roles in public life, including as writers. She gave her views on the extremes of what women face in Afghanistan; she deferred to what is happening in Iran at the moment and what happened in Afghanistan to Fakhunda, a woman who had been brutally attacked for questioning the behaviour of men and its adherence to the Koran. She noted with great sadness that when this occurred in Afghanistan the result was that very few people stood up for Fakhunda, instead many ignoring the violence as it occurred or worse, joining in. Ghezal said that

what is needed for women writers in Afghanistan is support in the form of writing materials – devices that will enable them to go on writing.

We also heard of the ongoing plight of women writers in Myanmar, where there is another repressive government, with so little visibility to the outside world, and where it is dangerous to be anybody critical of government, and especially dangerous for women.

At this meeting, we also discussed a new initiative the Women Writers' Committee of PEN International could take. Several years ago, this Committee established the PEN International VIDA count – to count the number of literary prizes for which women writers are shortlisted and then go on to win. The data is not robust enough yet to give an accurate picture of what is happening in the world. We will be amending the data collection to single years, and will be combining the data with more narrative findings of individual women writers and the significance of recognition in the form of winning significant prizes.

An entirely new endeavour, and perhaps one a writing community like PEN should warm to, is the establishment of Know Her Words by which PEN centres around the world will be encouraged to nominate the best 10 works from women writers from the region in which they are based. These will be aggregated to give a picture of excellent writing by women from across the world that will celebrate women's writing and give willing readers an easy way to be introduced to excellent women's writing from other places.

We are working out the details, but this one thing generated a lot of interest at the meeting. I'm looking forward to a lot of reading.

**Zoë Rodriguez**  
Joint President of Sydney PEN  
Chair of PEN International's Women Writers Committee

# An evening of Afghan literature, poetry and food

Afghanistan's rich culture of poetry and storytelling was celebrated at a dinner in Sydney last December attended by members of PEN Sydney and friends. **Claudia Taranto** discovered that freedom of expression and continuity of culture are ideas that the community of people from Afghanistan have embraced.

Since the fall of Kabul in August 2021, PEN Afghanistan has been forced to operate in exile, supporting writers and journalists who remained in the country and those who made it out.

Zaheda Ghani arrived in Australia as a child in the 1980s and her debut novel *Pomegranate and Fig* takes readers from the streets of Herat in the 1970s, to India in the 1980s and then to the suburbs of Sydney. In a conversation with Zarlisht Sawari from the University of Western Sydney, Zaheda discussed the so-called "golden age" in Afghanistan, before the Soviet invasion and how memories of this time have remained for those who left. She also revealed how important the older women in her novel and in her own family were to practising and passing on culture.

While conflict is a backdrop to the novel and its tragedies, it is the connections and sense of hope that Zarlisht, as a second generation Afghan Australian, wanted to highlight with Zaheda. Their descriptions of cooking and sharing family stories was mesmerising.

The poet Saber Ansari, known in the global Afghan diaspora for his writings on divine love and the 13th century poet Rumi, as well as his contributions to broadcasting, on SBS and previously in the USA on the Voice of Afghan radio network, read one of his poems.

His poem was written after a suicide bombing in Kabul University in 2020. It was translated and read in English by his daughter Sahar Ansari. Saber then read a poem in Dari, about people selling their children, selling their kidneys and in so doing selling their fate. He wrote it in response to Afghanistan's crippling poverty after the return of the Taliban. As well as this free style of poetry, Saber also writes in the more proscriptive Tasawuf form, adopted by Sufi poets like Rumi and Hafiz, writing about pure love, seeing God manifest in everything.

Afghan journalist Ghezal Kiyanoosh joined the occasion on Zoom from Germany and spoke of the challenges she has faced in adjusting to life in exile after the traumatic events of her escape from Kabul with her young family. It was a very moving moment to witness members of the Sydney Afghan community who are



**Iranian writer Aida Amidi, a member of the Iranian Writers' Association, has been persecuted for her commitment to free speech and freedom of expression.**

further down the journey of migration, counselling and supporting Ghezal.

The PEN Empty Chair was occupied by Iranian writer Aida Amidi who had been arrested in Tehran just days before, after a police raid on her home in the early hours. While Aida is out on bail, her trial is pending and members of the Iranian Writer's Association continue to be targeted by the Iranian government. However, through the work of PEN Sydney and other PEN Centres, four other Iranian writers were released in February this year.

The event was organised by Saba Group and PEN Sydney and raised more than \$1300 for PEN International's activities supporting writers and journalists in and from Afghanistan.



- The ongoing debate over words

# ‘Was it sensible or was it censorship?’

Controversy erupted in the writing and publishing world when it was revealed that scores of changes had been made to the classic children’s stories of Roald Dahl in the name of ‘sensitivity’,  
**Dr Susie Eisenhuth** writes.

British PM Rishi Sunak weighed in, even the Queen Consort raised a Royal eyebrow. And high profile writers all over the world joined the debate, expressing their dismay at the revelation that Roald Dahl’s publishers were in the process of re-writing some of his classic children’s books.

Words deemed to be offensive for modern audiences - singled out by a new breed of ‘sensitivity readers’ - were to be removed, with more benign words taking their place.

Scores of revisions had been made to the original texts of some of Dahl’s best known children’s titles by his publishers Puffin Books in an apparent bid to make them more inclusive and accessible for today’s readers.

Some of the changes involved individual words. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Augustus Gloop, a glutton for chocolate, would no longer be ‘enormously fat’, but instead just ‘enormous’. In *The Fabulous Mr Fox* the word ‘black’ would be removed from the description of the terrible tractors. In *The Twits* Mrs Twit would no longer be ‘ugly and beastly’ but just ‘beastly’.

Elsewhere characters would be rendered gender neutral. In *James and the Giant Peach*, the mysterious Cloud-Men who live in the sky would now be Cloud-People. In *The Enormous Crocodile* ‘we eat little boys and girls’ would read ‘we eat little children’. And in the new edition of *The Witches*, a tut tutting approach to gender specific roles meant that posing as an ordinary woman would involve working as a top scientist or running a business, rather than as a cashier in a supermarket or a typist for a businessman.

The Roald Dahl Story Company (now owned by Netflix), which worked with Puffin Books to review the texts, said it hoped the move would ensure that “Dahl’s wonderful stories and characters continue to be enjoyed by all children today.” But as the ABC’s Michael Edwards asked on *The World Today*, was it sensible, or was it censorship?

Author Salman Rushdie had no doubt. Himself famously a victim of suppression and violence for his novel *The Satanic Verses*, Rushdie, still recovering from

injuries sustained at a literary event in New York in August, conveyed his scathing reaction to the changes via twitter. “Roald Dahl was no angel but this is absurd censorship,” he said. “Puffin Books and the Dahl estate should be ashamed.”

While PM Rishi Sunak offered a jocular reference to the warning of Dahl’s *BFG* “not to gobblefunk with words”, writer Philip Pullman, author of the fantasy trilogy *His Dark Materials* was clearly exasperated, telling the BBC there were probably millions of Dahl editions in libraries, second hand book shops and the like. “What are you going to do about them?” he asked. “All these words are still there. Are you going to round up all the books and cross them out with a big black pen? The point is, these words, these phrases and language uses do change over time.”

Australian children’s author Mem Fox, speaking at Adelaide Writers Week, seemed to share Pullman’s impatience, telling the ABC the Dahl changes were “fatuous”.

“How dare they,” she said. “How dare they change anything that he wrote. We may find them distasteful, we may find them racist, we may find them sexist, we may find them gender-imbalanced...but whatever he did, he did then”.

Audiences needed to remember the books were written during a different era. “He wrote those words and they are historically set at a certain time,” she said. “We wouldn’t do it now because we know better. But you cannot put an author’s name underneath words he or she didn’t write.”

For broadcaster Cassie McCullagh, co-host of Radio National’s Bookshelf, the debate over the Dahl changes was “a thorny issue”.

“There are two sides to it,” she told *The World Today*. “One is the very real hurt that can be felt by readers who encounter materials in books that is really hurtful. Just the other day I was reading *Madame Bovary* and I was staggered to come across the N-word. It’s shocking. And that’s hurtful to people. Should it be there? Well I think there’s a case for changing it.”



In the case of Roald Dahl, she said, “it’s so tricky because what makes him fantastic is he’s this spiky, critical, devilish thinker with quite a wicked sense of humour. And this comes out in some of his adult fiction as well as his children’s fiction. And right now I think he’s a bit on the nose. I think a lot of people are just discovering that he wasn’t really a lovely guy all told.”

Dahl critics inevitably reference his history of crossing the line on sensitive issues, including making anti-semitic comments. In 2020 the Dahl family apologised on the official Dahl website for the “understandable hurt” caused by some of those remarks, which they said “stand in contrast to the man we knew and the values at the heart of Roald Dahl’s stories, which have positively impacted young people for generations.”

While the polarising debate on Puffin’s changes to the Dahl stories continued - sensible updates for the sake of inclusiveness versus blatant censorship and political correctness run wild- Suzanne Nossel, the CEO of PEN America, took to twitter to express the alarm of her organisation, which represents thousands of writers and works to defend and celebrate free expression through the advancement of literature and human rights.

In a series of tweets, Nossel wrote that “Amidst fierce battles against book bans and strictures on what can be taught and read, selective editing to make works of literature conform to particular sensibilities could

represent a dangerous new weapon. Those who might cheer specific edits to Dahl’s work should consider how the power to rewrite books might be used in the hands of those who do not share their values and sensibilities.

“Literature is meant to be surprising and provocative”, she said, and efforts to erase words that might cause offence only “dilute the power of storytelling. If we start down the path of trying to correct for perceived slights instead of allowing readers to receive and react to books as written, we risk distorting the work of great authors and clouding the essential lens that literature offers on society.”

Nossel suggested that instead of revising literature and “playing around” with text, publishers and editors could perhaps offer “introductory context that prepares people for what they are about to read, and helps them understand the setting in which it was written.”

In the wake of the controversy Puffin Books announced that along with the new editions, a collection of 17 Dahl works would be released untouched as part of the Roald Dahl Classic Collection. Francesca Dow, Managing Editor of the parent company Penguin Random House, said they had listened to the debate “which has reaffirmed the extraordinary power of Roald Dahl’s books and the very real questions around how stories from another era can be kept relevant for each new generation.”

# “Sensitivity readers” are the new foot soldiers in the culture wars

Sensitivity reader. There are no two words more certain to get a reaction from anyone involved in publishing. Sensitivity readers check manuscripts for bias, stereotypes and inaccuracies about minority groups of which, to use the current jargon, those readers have “lived experience”. And their existence is, depending on where you stand, a gross infringement of an author’s right to free speech as part of publishers’ craven surrender to online lynch mobs, or a necessary corrective to a still largely homogenous industry which cares little for marginalised voices. By **Boris Starling**.

Several high-profile novelists have come out against the practice. Lionel Shriver said, “The day my novels are sent to a sensitivity reader is the day I quit.” John Boyne’s take is that “no serious writer would ever allow their work to be so sanitised”. Kate Clanchy, whose former publisher Picador brought in sensitivity readers after she was accused of using racial tropes in her 2019 memoir *Some Kids I Taught and What They Taught Me*, wrote in *UnHerd* of her feedback from those readers: one of them “trails a noisy stream of alerts, like a lorry reversing”, another says that Clanchy should not “use ‘handicap’ in its ordinary sense of ‘impede’ (infraction level 2, serious).”

This is all in a certain way grimly amusing stuff, and Clanchy may be said to have earned the right to laugh bitterly. When the racism accusations against her first aired, various authors weighed in to defend or criticise, leading to some vicious online spats which spiralled far beyond the bounds of one woman and her memoir. But as a skilled writer, she knows exactly the effect that reproducing the above excerpts will have had. They tap into so many tropes beloved of culture warriors, as indeed does the phrase “sensitivity readers” itself. It implies spoiled, weedy snowflake millennials who put their own feelings above everything else and can’t bear even to countenance something they may find offensive, let alone engage with it. “Sensitivity” in this context is something negative, selfish, entitled and self-indulgent, but also with overtones of both Orwell and Huxley, a Thought Police tasked with enforcing universal blandness.

Many writers like to provoke and unsettle, to challenge people as well as comfort them. But there need be no discord between this and the use of “sensitivity readers”, especially if you start with a writer’s most basic tool: language. Think of them as “authenticity readers” – which is what they are – and the entire

narrative around them changes. I, and almost every writer I know, am at great pains to get even the smallest things right: the other day I spent an (exceptionally happy and nerdy) hour looking up train times between Stoke-on-Trent and Euston in 1948. I don’t hold with the adage “write what you know” – the entire point of novel writing is to invent and explore new worlds – but the phrase makes perfect sense when flipped. Know what you write. Make your milieu and your characters as authentic, believable and complex as you can.

To this end, why would you not seek the counsel of someone who already knows more about a subject than you do? If I’ve got something badly wrong in a book, I’d far rather know while still writing it (and be told this as part of a confidential communique) than once it’s out there and it’s open season. I’ve used such readers before and will use them again. My most recent novel, a love story set in North Korea called *The Law Of The Heart*, was read by someone with huge first-hand experience of the country (though given political sensitivities there he asked not to be identified), and he provided reams of exceptionally helpful notes. I’m just finishing the next one, *Half Way Tree*, set in Jamaica and Britain over three separate timelines, and will certainly ask for the process to be repeated with a suitable reader.

Lambasting sensitivity readers as proscriptive dictatorial killjoys is not only to misunderstand their role: it’s also to assign them substantially more clout than they actually have. Rebecca McNally, publishing director for Bloomsbury Children’s Books, said, “We don’t expect [sensitivity readers] to make books bulletproof, and don’t expect authors to implement all the sensitivity reader’s recommendations.” No publisher – certainly no reputable publisher – orders an author to incorporate every item in a sensitivity reader’s report. That’s not how it works, and that’s not how any of the editing process works. A book is worked on by at least two editors, one





on a macro level (structure, pacing, characters, themes) and the other on a micro (typos, mistakes, confusing passages). Non-fiction books often get a libel read too. In this respect, a sensitivity read is just another layer of input, and the same rules apply.

An author has three choices when dealing with an editorial suggestion: accept it, reject it, or agree with the problem identified but find a new way to solve it. In the course of a quarter century as a professional writer, my responses in those three categories run roughly 50-25-25. Sometimes conversations get heated as people fight their corners, but that's neither unusual nor necessarily unhealthy. It's a collaborative process – "an intelligent, informed dialogue," as McNally puts it, and everybody involved wants the finished product to be as good as it can be.

Ah, critics say: but what are a sensitivity reader's qualifications? You may as well ask the same thing about any editor working in the trade. There are no exams, no diplomas, no kitemarks. People are skilled or they're not: any specific comment can be either helpful or useless, and there is no guarantee that seniority or experience makes the first more likely than the second. Indeed, when I was writing a TV script many years ago, it was a running joke between the four of us in the room (the director, the producer, the script editor and me) that we could always tell from how far up the food chain any given suggestion had come, and not in a positive way either.

The underlying problem, of course, is that sensitivity readers exist at least partly because in-house editorial staff are predominantly of a given type: white, liberal and female. For all the talk about the need for greater diversity in publishing – a need which is very real and has been so for decades – actually doing something about it proves much harder. Publishing salaries are so low, and the industry

so London-centric, that the career better suits those with some kind of external financial resources, be that family money or a higher-earning partner.

This effective outsourcing of diversity is also perhaps a factor in why so many publishers are so scared of provoking Twitterstorms: they may not feel they have the credentials to be robust in defending their position. (Certain sensitivity readers advertising their services as "hire me to prevent Twitter calling out your book" doesn't help, either: it makes the practice sound cynical and insincere).

The toxicity of discourse on Twitter is arguably viler and more corrosive than on any other social media platform, and to see an often willingly-outraged mob in full cry, wielding their 5G smartphones like the pitchforks de nos jours, is never an edifying sight. I long for the day when those under attack stand their ground and remember which two words Macbeth uses after his famous "full of sound and fury" quote. A Twitterstorm may not signify precisely nothing, but it is still made by a relatively small number of people and blows over pretty quickly.

So in an ideal world, one of properly diverse publishing houses and social media exchanges conducted with a civil and genuine desire to listen and learn, perhaps we wouldn't need sensitivity readers at all. But the world is as it is and not as we would like it to be (enter, perhaps, the novelist with their imaginary existences). And in those terms, an author who objects to a sensitivity reader might reflect that the problem isn't with the person who reads the words, but with the person who writes them.

**Boris Starling is an award-winning author, screenwriter and journalist. His latest novel is *The Law Of The Heart*. This article appeared in *Perspective* magazine: [perspectivemag.co.uk](http://perspectivemag.co.uk)**

# ‘We have poorer books as a result’: Why Australian publishers are silenced by fear

Writing and publishing a book about a controversial public figure is like diving into shark-infested waters ABC investigative journalist Louise Milligan said at the recent Adelaide Writers’ Week. She wondered if she’d written her 2017 award-winning book *Cardinal: The Rise and Fall of Cardinal Pell* today, whether it would even be published. “There’s a lot more caution in the publishing world. It’s a defamation-happy climate.” **Jane Sullivan** reports.

Investigative journalist, Nine’s Adele Ferguson, agreed. “We have such punitive defamation laws, some of the worst in the world. People should be marching in the streets.”

The Writers’ Week crowd were probably not the kind to march in the streets, but they were keen that all voices should be heard and read – even the two Palestinian authors whose social media comments had led to boycotts by some sponsors and writers. Yet one of the themes of this peaceful and respectful gathering was how many voices were being silenced.

Sometimes this happened through the timidity of publishers, even with no threat of legal action. Publishing veteran Hilary McPhee said she was very concerned about the Australian industry today.

“We have fewer and fewer publishers and we have poorer and poorer books as a result. There’s a lot of cautiousness and nervousness. And the larger the company, the more nervous they are.” Larger companies were publishing fewer but more lucrative authors. A few smaller companies such as Upswell were taking risks, “but the big ones don’t seem to me to be brave. It’s terribly bad for authors.”

Sometimes the authors themselves withdrew their work. Christine Wallace said she dropped her biography of Julia Gillard at the last minute because she was worried Gillard’s enemies would use the book against her.

At other times, censorship came through libraries. US crime fiction writer Sara Paretsky said her country was in a really difficult, dangerous place: “Libraries and school boards are banning books that discuss lesbian or gay or trans children’s experience. The race to the bottom on who can silence the most voices is really frightening.”

In Australia, investigative journalists’ books



Louise Milligan (top) says Australia has a defamation-happy climate. Picture credit: Simon Schluter.

Hilary McPhee (below) says there is a lot of cautiousness in Australian publishing, thanks to the country’s defamation laws.





are particularly at risk. Novelist and lawyer Eve Thomson said that more and more defamation cases were used as ways to silence stories, and Ferguson said those ways were becoming much more creative. "Smaller institutions can't afford to fight these bullying tactics. Any time you send out questions, they can go to court. Just going to court can cost \$300,000 dollars."

Ferguson's unauthorised biography of Gina Rinehart was legalised twice and she fact-checked everything, which demonstrates the lengths publishers need to take when covering a high-powered and wealthy subject.

Both Ferguson and Milligan had faced subpoenas to reveal their sources, and had they lost might have gone to prison. It was particularly hard for Milligan because the proceedings were to be held in secret. She was at the Byron Bay writers' festival promoting Cardinal when she found out. "It was all lovely,

they were giving us standing ovations, and I was terrified, crying, thinking what's happening here? Who's watching?"

On top of legal decisions, they also had to be careful to make moral decisions about what they revealed: "Fair, sober, trauma-informed journalism," as Milligan put it.

After hearing about all the obstacles, it seemed a wonder that investigative expose biographies were published at all. But what were we missing? Ferguson was asked what her book on Rinehart would have been like if there were no legal restrictions. "It would have been a lot more juicy," she said.

**Jane Sullivan is a books columnist and reviewer for *The Sydney Morning Herald* where this first appeared.**

## Unhearable views

**As Monica Attard, Co-Director of the Centre of Media Transition at UTS, says, the Adelaide Writers' Week may be done and dusted but it was not without a degree of controversy. The events curator, Louise Adler, found herself having to fend off calls to cancel two speakers and to herself resign. All in the name of free speech.**

The two speakers whose views were considered 'unhearable' were author Susan Abulhawa and poet Mohammed El-Kurd – both Palestinian writers who hold strong views about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, in Abulhawa's case, about the Russian-Ukrainian war, too. Mohammed El-Kurd has criticised Israel using language that some consider to be anti-semitic. But it was Abulhawa's views, expressed on social media, that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is a 'depraved Zionist with a house on stolen Palestinian land', a 'clown who is trying to ignite World War III' and 'mad and far more dangerous than (Russian President Vladimir) Putin' that attracted the most vociferous criticism.

Adler refused to uninvite either writer, judging that to do so would be an act of censorship. Mohammed El-Kurd appeared via video link from New York and Susan Abulhawa made the journey to Adelaide in person. But as a result of Adler's decision to have the two appear, two Ukrainian writers pulled out of the festival and some sponsors withdrew support. The critics were loud in claiming that allowing the Palestinians writer to appear at the festival was less about freedom of speech and more about permitting hate speech.

There wasn't much room for public discourse at another session – one chaired by this writer – when London-based financier Bill Browder was questioned about his claims about who was responsible for the death of his friend and colleague Sergei Magnitsky, a Ukrainian-born, Russian lawyer and tax advisor who worked for Browder and uncovered widespread corruption by Russian tax and law enforcement officials. Magnitsky's death and the efforts Browder has gone to since to uncover the truth behind it and the tax fraud he and his company were accused of was the impetus for The Autonomous Sanctions Amendment (Magnitsky-style and Other Thematic Sanctions) Act in Australia. There was also disquiet when Browder was questioned about how he knew corruptly obtained money had flowed directly to the Russian President. Both questions were designed to elicit evidence. Browder responded with details of how he and his investigators had followed money trails. However, it was the fact that the questions were asked that some members of the audience didn't seem to like.

Freedom of speech is a significant and meaningful concept in democratic societies. Even though the Australian Constitution doesn't explicitly protect it, and even though there are important limitations on hate speech and other categories of speech, the right to speak freely only has meaning if it applies equally to everyone. Politics, culture, ideas and art are what makes writers' festivals worth attending. The alternative is freedom of speech, only if you agree with me.

# Sydney Belmarsh Tribunal experts pressure Prime Minister to save Assange

Politicians, lawyers, journalists, whistle blowers and human rights defenders united in Sydney to plea with Prime Minister Albanese to step up his efforts to free imprisoned Australian publisher and WikiLeaks co-founder, Julian Assange, reports **Jodie Harrison**.

Inspired by the Russell-Sartre Tribunals of the Vietnam War, the Belmarsh Tribunal convened in Sydney University's Great Hall on March 4, for a full-house event co-chaired by legal and media identities Mark Davis and Mary Kostakidis.

Mr Assange has now been arbitrarily detained for 13 years, four of those on remand in London's super-max HM Belmarsh Prison, awaiting permission to appeal extradition to the US on espionage charges.

Mr Assange's wife Stella implored the Prime Minister to use his alliance power with the United States to demand the release of her husband.

"The Prime Minister, more than anyone, holds Julian's fate in his hands. And so, I ask the Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, to take Julian's fate in his hands and bring him home to us, bring him home to our kids, bring him home to me and end his suffering," Mrs Assange said.

Eminent speakers at the Tribunal included whistle blowers, former CIA intelligence officer John Kiriakou who exposed the US 'waterboarding' of suspected terrorists, and 'Afghan Files' Australian army intelligence lawyer David McBride.

Other experts who addressed the live and online audience were Bob Carr who served as Foreign Minister in the Gillard Government in 2012-2013, Greek politician Yanis Varoufakis and sitting cross-benchers ALP's Josh Wilson, Senator David Shoebridge, Dr Monique Ryan and Bridget Archer.

Testimony was heard about abuse of legal process and the dangerous precedent the Assange case has on press freedom from human rights lawyers Bernard Collaery, Kellie Tranter and Assange's legal counsel Jennifer Robinson as well as MEAA President Karen Percy, award-winning journalists Kerry O'Brien and Dean Yates, a Reuters bureau chief in Baghdad during the Iraq war.

The lasting, traumatic effect of war was clearly evident as Mr Yates gave a heart-wrenching account of the 2007 US Apache helicopter airstrike on civilians in the streets of Baghdad that killed two of his Reuters



**Stella Assange reports from the United Kingdom.**

staff. The video 'Collateral Murder' made headlines around the world when it was published by Assange.

"For nearly three years, lawyers from Reuters tried to get a copy of this tape from the Pentagon through Freedom of Information requests so we could understand what had happened, better protect our staff in Iraq. The Pentagon repeatedly refused," he said.

"In 2010, Julian Assange published video of the entire attack. It was obvious why the U.S. government didn't want to share the tape with Reuters. It shows grainy figures on a Baghdad street. The hellish clack of the Apache's chain gun. Clouds of dust as cannon shells crash into men. A wounded man, (Reuters driver) Saeed Chmagh, a father of four, trying to crawl for three minutes. When a Good Samaritan taking his two children to school in his minivan stops to help Saeed, permission to attack is again granted. Crazy Horse 1-8 fires 120 rounds at the van...

"Mr Assange faces 175 years in prison. Yet the United States didn't prosecute the men who pulled



**Italian artist Davide Dormino's life-sized bronze sculptures, representing the figures of legendary persecuted truth-tellers Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden standing on chairs, were on public display in Sydney and Melbourne in early March as part of an ongoing global tour.**

the trigger or anyone else in the chain of command. It didn't prosecute those who did the bogus investigation into the attack or engaged in the cover-up and lied about it."

Also appearing was academic Kylie Moore-Gilbert who spent 804 days in an Iranian prison on espionage charges. She was released last year in a tri-country prisoner swap after the Australian Government intervened in her case.

"I'm very grateful and very thankful to the Australian Government for securing my freedom two-and-a-half years into an unjust 10-year prison sentence for crimes that I did not commit. Julian is, similarly, charged with ludicrous crimes of which he is not guilty. He has suffered long enough. I call on the Australian Government to demonstrate the same resoluteness that they applied to my own case to secure Julian Assange's freedom. Julian is one of us. He's a brave person who stood up and spoke up for what is right," Ms Moore-Gilbert said.

As Stella Assange, Julian's wife, said, "It's no longer a question about whether Julian should stand trial, whether he should be free, but how he should be free and when he should be free in the eyes of those in power. And the answer is right now. Right now. And how? Well, whatever it takes. Because Australia is the most important ally to the United States. It is more important than Israel and the Middle East. It is more important than the United Kingdom. It is the most important ally because of China. And Australia has the power to bring Julian home."

The former CIA intelligence officer John Kiriakou said that when American authorities say that Julian Assange will receive a fair trial, he says from first-hand

experience that they're lying. "No national security defendant has ever won a case in the Eastern District of Virginia. And Julian's 'jury of his peers' would be made up of people who work for, or who have relatives and friends who work for, the CIA, the FBI, the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security, and dozens of Intelligence Community contractors. That's why the Justice Department sought the case there. The fix is in."

As Bob Carr, former Foreign Minister Gillard Government (2012-2013), said in relation to the US helicopter strike on civilians in Baghdad, Assange has suffered enough. "These are war crimes and we know about them, and the world deserves to know about them. We know about them because Julian Assange published them. That's what's at stake here. And whether an Australian is going to be punished for this because of an extraterritorial reach by the Americans that we'd find repugnant, utterly repugnant if it were another nation reaching out to extradite Assange because he'd offended the laws of China, India or Myanmar."

According to Julian Assange's legal counsel, Jennifer Robinson, the indictment includes 17 separate counts under the Espionage Act for receipt, possession and publication of information. "As the New York Times and Washington Post have made clear, the indictment criminalises public interest journalism. The Freedom of the Press Foundation has called it the most terrifying threat to free speech in the 21st century. And it is.

**Watch the full recording of the Belmarsh Tribunal Sydney:** [youtube.com/watch?v=OiXgUMCMRww](https://youtube.com/watch?v=OiXgUMCMRww)



- An overview: continuing the battle

# Stop the political persecution, free Julian Assange now

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has ended the wilful neglect of successive Australian governments that have condoned the incarceration of Julian Assange without a word of protest. However, his statement “Enough is enough” has not been enough for Assange supporters who continue to call for urgent and decisive political intervention, reports **Constantine Pakavakis**.

John Lyons, the Global Affairs Editor of the ABC, speaking on News Breakfast in January, predicted the unconditional release of Assange within two months. This could only happen by two scenarios: the UK refuses the extradition, or President Biden drops the charges. However, a third scenario of Albanese negotiating a Hicks style plea bargain with the US now seems unlikely.

Julian Assange is now in his fourth year in maximum security Belmarsh prison after being ousted from the Ecuadorian Embassy where he had been granted political asylum for seven years. In collusion with the US and UK governments, Ecuador revoked his Ecuadorian passport, voided his amnesty, and allowed British police to enter the embassy and arrest him.

On the day of his arrest, he was taken before a judge who convicted him of violating bail and sentenced him to 50 weeks in a maximum security prison. Assange only had 15 minutes to prepare with his lawyer and the trial itself took only 15 minutes.

Mr Assange's exercise of his right to seek and obtain asylum is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and should have been a sufficient defense to not even have been convicted of the Violation of the Bail Act. This violation is rarely punished. On occasions it's punished with a fine, but very rarely is it ever punished with prison time.

His arrest for breaking bail, his unprecedented long sentence, and his continued imprisonment constitute evidence of political interference by the UK government. Currently, Mr Assange has lodged an appeal against former UK Home Secretary Priti Patel's decision to extradite him. If the appeal is allowed, it is expected to take years, further endangering his physical condition and psychological health, already at risk from treatment deemed as torture by Nils Meltzer, the former UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

Julian Assange's lawyer Jennifer Robinson, says “This case needs an urgent political solution. Julian does not have another decade to wait for a legal fix. It might be surprising to hear me, as a lawyer, say this, but the solution is not legal, it is political.

“The UK-US extradition treaty prohibits extradition for political offences – and yet the US is purporting relying on this treaty to extradite Julian under the Espionage Act.

Espionage is a political offence.”

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese was asked in Parliament last November by independent MP Dr Monique Ryan: “Australian citizen Julian Assange is still contained in Belmarsh prison, charged by a foreign government with acts of journalism. Mr Assange's freedom will only come from political intervention. Will the government intervene to bring Mr Assange home?”

Mr Albanese's reply may have been enough to convince the UK's minister for the Indo-Pacific, Anne-Marie Trevelyan, and its high commissioner to Australia, Vicki Treadell, who were both in the audience.

“I, sometime ago, made my point that enough is enough. It is time for this matter to be brought to a conclusion. In that, I don't express any personal sympathy with some of the actions of Mr Assange. I do say though that this issue has gone on for many years now, and when you look at the issue of Mr Assange and compare that with the person responsible for leaking the information, Bradley Manning, now Chelsea Manning, she is now able to participate freely in US society.

“The government will continue to act in a diplomatic way, but can I assure the member for Kooyong that I have raised this personally with representatives of the US administration that it is time that this matter be brought to a close. This is an Australian citizen. As I said, I don't have sympathy for Mr Assange's actions, on a whole range of matters. But, having said that, you have to reach a point whereby what is the point of this continuing, this legal action, which could be caught up now for many years into the future? So I will continue to advocate, as I did recently in meetings that I have held. I thank the member for her question and for her genuine interest in this, along with so many Australian citizens who have contacted me about this issue.”

The extraordinary breaking bail conviction and sentence, the continued imprisonment in maximum



security, the illegal surveillance and invasion of privacy between Mr Assange and his lawyer Jennifer Robinson (for which she has been compensated), the denial of access to a computer for nine months and then given a computer with the keys glued down, the confinement to a glass cage away from his lawyers during court proceedings, the three empty seats in court reserved for official Australian observers, and the lack of appropriate medical attention throughout his imprisonment and during the mini stroke he suffered in court, are but a few examples that cannot be explained with any other conclusion than political persecution.

According to Stella Assange, Julian's wife, "It's a politically motivated prosecution because depending on who sits in the White House, Julian gets prosecuted or he doesn't. Under Obama there was a decision by the Department of Justice to not prosecute Julian for the Manning leaks. It was announced by the ADOJ spokesperson...Matthew Miller [who] said there is no way to prosecute Wikileaks in the Manning case without setting a precedent for the rest of the press and ...also said Julian Assange is not a hacker, he is a publisher, and we can't go after him for that reason."

Recent developments in the US could also be moving the Biden administration closer to a resolution that would satisfy the Albanese diplomatic efforts.

On 28 November 2022, the five media organisations that first helped Assange publish leaked diplomatic cables have urged the US government to drop its prosecution of the WikiLeaks co-founder because it is undermining press freedom. In a combined statement the Guardian, the New York Times, Le Monde, Der Spiegel, and El País wrote:

"This indictment sets a dangerous precedent, and threatens to undermine America's first amendment and

the freedom of the press.

"Obtaining and disclosing sensitive information when necessary in the public interest is a core part of the daily work of journalists. If that work is criminalised, our public discourse and our democracies are made significantly weaker."

Former head of the CIA Mike Pompeo, who may be a candidate for the Presidency, tweeted last June, "Good on UK Home Secretary @pritipatel for approving extradition of indicted hacker Julian Assange, whose goal was always to imperil American security through his non-state 'intelligence' service. One step closer to protecting the young men and women who protect America"

Anthony Albanese needs to remind President Biden that this is an opportunity to defend press freedom and the First Amendment, a position he and President Obama held. The precarious health of Julian Assange demands that he be freed immediately.

PEN Australia supports the resolution of the 85th World Congress of PEN International and calls on the United States to:

- Drop the charges against WikiLeaks founder and publisher Julian Assange and withdraw their extradition request. Espionage laws should not be used against journalists and publishers for disclosing information of public interest.

PEN International also calls on the United Kingdom to:

- Refrain from extraditing Julian Assange and release him from prison immediately. Assange's freedom of movement upon release must be respected.

**Constantine Pakavakis is chair of PEN Melbourne Writers for Peace Committee.**

# Writing in Resistance establishes a safe creative space

Two years ago, writer **Saba Vasefi** devised an ambitious initiative to create a safe creative place for exiled women and non-binary people, a place to soothe, restore and lift the despondency common to many who find themselves in a state of exile. Her efforts inaugurated Writing in Resistance and found a place at Red Room Poetry. The project provides writing and performance mentorship, editing and translation, paid publication, and public performance. Here, Dr Vasefi outlines her mission.

**A**t Red Room I was able to co-create a space for the writing and sharing of feminist, exile poetry, a space in which the 'room' is a collective, not individual, one. It was a space for collaborative creativity where individual freedom of expression is invigorated by communal freedom and there, multiple forms of resistance occur.

This project aims to challenge invisible borders of exclusion by elevating and honouring the voices of women and non-binary people who are affected by oppressive cultural, political, and social systems to be authors of their own stories.

*Home was where  
tyrants defecate in the mouths of citizens  
the bitter taste of corruption  
washed down with their urine.*

*Home was where the soil is stark red  
as the nation bled into the earth,  
where instead of crops,  
skeletal remains protrude.*

*Home was where children make wishes  
to shoot bullets not stars  
where vultures are more nourished  
than civilians.*

**Achol Juk**, 'Home Tasted Like War'

Their testimonies are the poetic evidence that reveals the personal implications of gender-based violence as an invisible aspect of their lives. They offer alternative forms of representing intimate modes of harm in a social system characterised by power relations, dominance, hierarchy, and competition. Their poetic expressions are testimony to the experiences, resilience, and resistance that demand self-regulation, self-determination, and self-sovereignty.

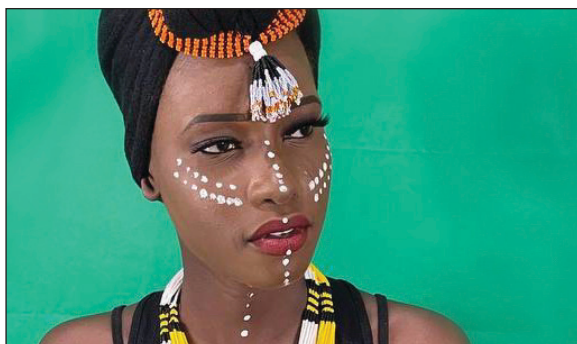
*I swear by the lonely heart of my Kurdistan  
— among bullets and blood —  
I will plant trees for abandonment  
in the distance of my wounds  
from Ilam to Nauru  
I paint the hope with green to revive.*  
**Golestan Hatami**, 'Miscarriage of Injustice'

For those whose sense of belonging has dwindled, being heard and having their own narrative is vital to strengthening their sense of identity. In holding space for Writing in Resistance, Red Room Poetry, through commissioned work, mentorship, translation and public performance, supports a new generation of exiled voices. Women who have been displaced and who cross borders construct a new terrain of resistance where peripheral issues become central. They testify via poetry, painting, photography, filming, and letter writing.

*The Taliban forced me to change  
my home, more than my shoes.  
For two decades, I'm nomad  
from this continent to another  
Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nauru  
and Australia now.*

*Nowhere on the earth  
embraces me to settle.  
I touched tyranny  
in the closed camp,  
suffered from indefinite separation*





**Achol Juk**



**Golestan Hatami**



**Narges Alizadeh**



**Negar Rezvani**

*but my punishment  
does not know the end.*

**Narges Alizadeh, 'Indefinite Displacement'**

They use hybrid forms of expression as a form of 'counter-conduct' to claim identities that make their lives coherent and meaningful, for example, the body language of defiance like hunger strikes, lip sewing, and burning their flesh. Or the visual languages such as surreptitious filming and photographing, painting or smuggling data, detention letters, or poems across borders. Whether being persecuted in Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia or incarcerated in Australian detention centres, or marginalised in the community, many displaced women are learning to defy their invisibility and gain autonomy.

For the survivors of authoritarian regimes who lived under subjugation and oppression, sustaining themselves and their humanity can be a monumental undertaking. In their journey to free themselves, they reject the guardianship system that vetoes their choices and identity.

*For the wind,  
for human rights,  
for politics,  
there is no trust –  
Wherever the tongueless fire explodes*

*and silent suffering sits in its ashes  
they arrive to give aid:  
not to save lives,  
but to facilitate deaths.  
Where everything is wild  
even light is a prisoner,  
and justice commits suicide every day.*

**Negar Rezvani, 'Silent Suffering'**

Writing in Resistance challenges invisible regimes of power that subjugate border crossers and instead creates a collective sanctuary at the intersection of race, age, class, gender, sexual preference, disability and belief.

**Last year, *Nauru Narratives — Writing in Resistance*, selected as part of the Art Gallery of New South Wales Refugee Week, amplified diverse voices from Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and Iran. In continuation of the Red Room Poetry's commitment to providing paid opportunities for emerging poets who face barriers to creative expression, Writing in Resistance will be celebrated again in the Art Gallery of NSW on September 3, 2023.**

**Dr Saba Vasefi is an award-winning scholar journalist who writes on the human impacts of Australia's immigration and border policies.**

# Fishes swimming in the river, and birds flying above it set the rhythms of the poet's life



Bob and the river (Photograph by Hazel Johnson)

Robert Adamson's publisher **Devin Johnston** celebrates his friendship and professional relationship with the poet with this reminiscence.

In July of 2022, following a pattern of several decades, my family and I visited Robert Adamson and his wife, the photographer Juno Gemes, at their home on Cheero Point, on the Hawkesbury River north of Sydney. One memorable morning we all set out in their boat, *The Swamp Harrier*, past the Brooklyn wharf and Little Wobby, past the broad opening to the Pacific Ocean, and through Cowan Creek to America Bay.

We dropped anchor beneath a tree where a pair of whistling kites were whistling sweetly and we fished a little, catching two small bream to take home for the cats. A waterfall from recent winter rains poured down the sandstone escarpment. We ate bread and cheese, talking through the morning. Bob spoke of rowing to this bay in his youth, and on to Jerusalem Bay, a favourite fishing spot and the subject of his first fully finished

poem: 'Whipbirds in needle-frost surge on the tidal mist, ventriloquists / down the corridors of morning.'

Through his childhood, Bob often sought refuge on the Hawkesbury at the home of his paternal grandfather Fa-Fa, a fisherman. Yet an undercurrent of unhappiness and alienation led him to juvenile detention at Mount Penang Training School for Boys, and then prison at Long Bay Penitentiary. Even separated from the river, his inner life was defined by birds and fish. As he later recounted, 'Sitting in a cell, far from the Hawkesbury, the birds of my childhood would flutter through the dome of my skull as mullet jumped in the black water.'

While incarcerated, he found his way to poetry. From the first, he fused emotional intensity, linguistic acuity, and a sense of place, mapping a psychogeography in his verse. These qualities, among others, make Bob one

of Australia's greatest poets, "that rare instance of a poet who can touch all the world and yet stay particular, local to the body he's been given in a literal time and place" (as Robert Creeley put it).

Fishes swimming through the Hawkesbury, and birds flying above it, set the rhythms of Bob's life. They were extensions of his self, at once alien and familiar. Through his real and imaginative engagement with these creatures, he often explored the tension between freedom and captivity. In childhood, his love of birds led him to catch them, and his theft of a bird led to his own incarceration. Yet they remained for him 'symbols of freedom'.

In a similar fashion, Bob would sometimes describe a deep ambivalence about fishing, in which getting close to the mauve-silver body of a mulloway involves killing it. As he writes in one of his greatest poems, *'The Gathering Light'*:

*Time whistles around us, an invisible  
flood tide that I let go  
while I take in what I have done.  
It wasn't a fight, I was drawn to this moment.  
The physical world drains away  
into a golden calm.*

*The sun is a hole in the sky, a porthole—  
you can see turbulence out there,  
the old wheeling colours and their dark forces—  
but here on the surface of the river  
where I cradle the great fish in my arms  
and smell its pungent death, a peace  
I've never known before—a luminous absence  
of time, pain, sex, thought, of everything  
but the light.*

The moment of the mulloway's death is awful in the etymological sense of that word, full of awe. Such poems achieve a visionary intensity, outside of time.

Only much later would we realise that our jaunt in July would be Bob's last fishing trip, his last time on the Hawkesbury, which had occupied so much of his life and imagination. In retrospect, it was a season of last things with him: a few days later, he would give his last poetry reading, at Brett Whiteley Studios in Surrey Hills. On that occasion, we launched his book *Reaching Light: Selected Poems*, and we held a public conversation. I asked him about the dark ambivalence that runs through the middle period of his work, evident in the very titles of books such as *The Clean Dark* and *Black Water*; and the turn to happiness in his later poems. He replied,

"I had some sorrow in my early years, and I had a lot of guilt. But then, as I wrote, I was writing that away. And then I got onto the Eurydice and Orpheus myth: I was imagining Eurydice going to Hell and then trying to get away, and Orpheus conning or charming the King of Hell, saying, 'Let us go!',"

and him replying, 'Okay, as long as you don't look back.' That's got so much in it . . . I was looking back, that's all I was doing: I was just looking back all the time.

"By this stage I had met Juno, and one of the first things she said to me was, 'Photography is an art form where you draw with light.' I kept thinking of coming up from Hell, up from Hades, and seeing the sunlight and how terrible it would be for Eurydice to be thrown back down into Hell; and Orpheus then going into the sunlight and then having to pay the consequences, being torn apart by women and his head thrown into the river, decapitated and still singing. I kept thinking of this image, reaching light: what would happen if we both reached light? Of course, it wasn't hard to write joyful poems, because we just get on so well, and we're in love."

The Orpheus myth recurs in Bob's poetry, framing variations on the question: how do we look back on the pain of the past, without sacrificing the present moment? Such is the writer's double bind — in the words of Wright Morris, 'real losses and imaginary gains.' But Bob wrote his way around or through the problem of retrospection. When he asks, 'What would happen if we both reached light?', the answer includes the light-filled home he and Juno made and shared together: 'French doors present us / with a slice of night, shining clear' (*'Garden Poem'*). By the time he was writing *Net Needle*, his last volume of new poetry, he was able to look back at his childhood with a degree of humour and fondness.

Through August and September of last year, Bob and I were working on a final book, a selection of his prose on the natural world called *Birds and Fish* (forthcoming next year). Once Bob had been diagnosed with liver cancer, the project took on new urgency: doctors gave him only weeks to live. In December, I paid a last visit, with a rough manuscript for the book in my bag. When I arrived, Bob's health was in a steep decline and he could barely walk. On December 13, Juno, John Griffith and I moved Bob into hospice at Neringah. He had the chills when we reached the facility, and joked, 'I feel like I'm in Jerusalem Bay at half past six in the morning.' Even after leaving the Hawkesbury, it still ran through his veins and metaphors.

The next day, we read through his manuscript, selecting some journal entries to include. After hours of talk — of sentences and paragraphs, cuckoos and bowerbirds, mulloway and garfish, the 'shining incidents' of his life — we left Bob lying in his bed, happy yet exhausted. He slipped into a long sleep, then passed away at 1 am on Friday, 16 December 2022.

His poems remain to keep us company, as the lasting trace of his voice and mind: as 'Reaching Light' reminds us, 'Where was it we left from? / We say the journey's up, but maybe // memory sinks deeper.'

**Devin Johnston is an editor for *Flood Editions* and Literary Executor for Robert Adamson. His most recent book is *Dragons: Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2023).**



# Hefty new penalties now applied to protesters

Human rights advocates voiced their concern at the NSW Government's crackdown following a climate protest on the Harbour Bridge. Did the hefty new penalties fit the crime? And then again, as the facts behind the tabloid headlines emerged, what exactly was the crime? **Nick O'Malley** tells the story.

**D**eanna "Coco" Violet wept with relief inside the NSW district court in March this year when she learned that her 15-month prison sentence had been set aside.

Almost a year earlier, you might remember, Violet was one of four protesters who blocked a lane on the Sydney Harbour Bridge as part of a climate protest.

She clambered aboard the roof of a rented truck and held aloft a flare to draw attention to her cause.

The state's political and criminal justice system bared its teeth in response.

In the miserable legal prose of the seven charges levelled against her, the flare she set off that morning on the bridge had become an "unauthorised explosive". But that was the least of her problems.

Violet became the first person to be charged with a new offence - an amendment to the roads act that allowed for fines of up to \$22,000 and up to two years in jail for anyone found to have blocked major infrastructure in a way which "seriously disrupts or obstructs vehicles or pedestrians".

In court the crown prosecutor argued that though Violet's protest did not involve violence, it was not peaceful.

"It was overt and deliberate disruption... Which can be contrasted to peaceful, organised rallies where organisers confer with police and the public so there is no disruption to the normal flow of traffic," said the police prosecutor.

Violet's record of arrests for protest was described as "significant criminal history" and the court was told that her action on the bridge had left an ambulance caught in a traffic jam. (More on that claim later.)

"[W]hat you have failed to take into account in the actions of stopping people going about their everyday life, is other people's mental health concerns, or other

people's health and safety," NSW Magistrate Allison Hawkins said in sentencing.

"You have halted an ambulance under lights and siren. What about the person in there? What about that person and their family? What are they to think of you and your cause? In fact, you do damage to your cause when you do childish stunts and dangerous stunts like this. It angers the community and rightfully so."

Violet was sentenced to 15 months in prison and led from the dock to a cell, where she stayed for 13 days until bail could be secured.

Former Premier Dominic Perrottet was not among those appalled to see a young woman locked up for so long for expressing her point of view via legitimate, albeit illegal, protest.

Coco's imprisonment "was pleasing to see", he said. "If protesters want to put our way of life at risk, then they should have the book thrown at them ... We want people to be able to protest but do it in a way that doesn't inconvenience people right across NSW."

In the wake of an earlier round of climate protests that saw access roads and rail lines to ports being briefly blocked, Perrottet's government, with the full support of Labor's opposition, had drafted and passed new laws against protest.

"It's a really badly written law," lawyer Mark Davis, who has defended dozens of protestors, later told me of the amendment to the traffic act.

"I mean, it is astonishingly badly written. It is so ambiguous no one really knows what it means. What [under the law] is a major road? No one knows."

According to Davis the wording is so loose that anyone slowly crossing a road could be arrested and face a two-year sentence.

Further, he notes, police are already well armed with powers to clear roads.



**Protesters support Coco Violet. Photograph by Kate Geraghty courtesy of *The Sydney Morning Herald*.**

"If police really want you to get off the road, they instruct you to get off the road. And if you don't get off the road, they charge you with failure to comply with a police direction. It's pretty simple, right?"

It is simple, which is why it is so clear that the purpose of the new law was to pander to conservative tabloid media commentators by hampering political speech with which they disagreed rather than to clear roads.

The problem is that no appeasement will be enough for these voices.

Politicians who try will maintain their favour only by continuing to do so, introducing ever more clumsy and dangerous law.

When Violet was sentenced to an extended prison term I wrote that the prosecution and the premier's celebration of it broke an unspoken contract in our democracy, citing the case of another protestor, Jonathan Moylan.

Seeking to attract attention to a coal mine extension in 2014 Moylan had drafted a hoax press release saying that ANZ had opted out of providing finance for the project, prompting a short-lived but significant share price slump for the miner Whitehaven.

As a result Moylan was among the first people to ever receive a custodial sentence for a climate protest in NSW.

This was "much more than some sort of public mischief", said Justice Davies, sentencing Moylan to one year and eight months in prison. "Here, the market was manipulated, vast amounts of shares were unnecessarily traded and some investors lost money or their investment

in Whitehaven entirely. These were not just 'day traders and speculators' ... superannuation funds and ordinary investors suffered damage."

But Davies accepted that Moylan's intent was not malicious. "You did it for motives that I accept were sincerely held by you, even though your methods of achieving them were wrong," Justice Davies said, suspending Moylan's sentence and releasing him.

In his sentencing Davies acknowledged that conventions over the role of protest were well established, referencing a case heard in the UK's Privy Council in 2006.

"Civil disobedience on conscientious grounds has a long and honourable history in this country," said Lord of Appeals Lennie Hoffmann. Accommodating such protest, he said, was the mark of a civilised community.

Sometimes that sense of proportion will include a deliberate decision to break the law and to challenge authority.

In Violet's case the police prosecutor's proposal that public protest should be confined to "peaceful, organised rallies where organisers confer with police and the public so there is no disruption to the normal flow of traffic" is to demand that it be thoroughly enfeebled.

Protest, sometimes, should be angry and disruptive.

In throwing the book, as Perrottet put it, at Coco Violet, the state lost all sense of proportion, but it had also proved that its new anti-protest law was as late-night clumsy as Davis alleged.

Even before Coco had her imprisonment set aside the NSW police had withdrawn the same charge against another 16 protestors he was representing, most of whom had been arrested in another peaceful climate protest nowhere near a piece of major infrastructure. Whatever that might be.

And in court on March 15 the prosecutor revealed that police too might have been clumsy in helping to prepare the brief against Violet. It turned out that there had been no ambulance caught in the traffic, no lights and sirens, no stricken patient blocked from care.

Less than a week after Violet's prison sentence was dropped the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released the last section of its sixth assessment of the state of our climate.

It showed that the world has already hit 1.1 degrees of warming and is likely to hit 1.5 degrees in the first half of the next decade.

The document included a graph showing the stark intergenerational injustice of the crisis. Children born today will be witness to weather extremes that their grandparents could barely imagine.

As a result of our catastrophic failure to address climate change protests will grow around the world over the coming years and months, no matter how many bad laws are cheered through midnight sittings.

**Nick O'Malley is National Environment and Climate Editor for *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.**

# I read not as a luxury but as if my life depended on it

Writer **Sarah Malik**, whose acclaimed memoir *Desi Girl: On feminism, race, faith and belonging* was published last year, describes her journey to discover an independent creative voice in her address on International Women's Day in March at the University of Technology, Sydney.

**I**t was just over 20 years ago that I walked through the front doors to do an arts and law degree. I was 18, a bookish and shy young Muslim woman from a western Sydney public school. I was exhilarated and so excited by the life I wanted at a big city university like UTS. It felt like my love for words was a portal that had transported me with a magic Dorothy click-of-the-heels into a better space – the promise of an education opening doors that had not been available to anyone in my family.

I dreamed of being a journalist, a writer, of making a mark in the world.

Words made sense of the world for me. They helped give shape to a nebulous cloud of half-formed questions and desires. They paved a road to self-determination from the limitations of a working-class adolescence and the wider world that circumscribed it.

It is why I felt attracted to a career in journalism and writing. I was fascinated by how contested competing truth claims were, the way information was strictly guarded, words carefully crafted to create ideas and stories that impact the way we think. Words full of power, both weapons and shields, that could illuminate or obscure, create sympathy or antipathy.

I read. I read, and was comforted and discomfited. In my early 20s, I devoured the news, words, and the Internet, finding solace in other hybrids blogging to make sense of the world. We were the in-between generation, Salafis and Sufis and seekers, who derived inspiration from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Rumi, Amina Wadud and Naomi Woolf, Alama Iqbal and Hafez.

I read not as a luxury but as if my life depended on it. To open up my life from the vice-like grip of other people's projections of me, of messages that told me who I was and what I should be, from invasive gazes that felt like they sliced into me, leaving me no room to breathe.

The gaze of the Imam who told me a woman's place was to be obedient, the gaze of the white feminist who told me my people were backward, the papers that blared that Muslims were dangerous and anti-democratic. Reading was the lifeline that opened my horizons. Literature and higher education was the hand

that came out of the page and took mine, the hand that understood, and eventually the hand that empowered me to contest the way narratives had defined what I learned was historically 'the other', people like me who did not have the platforms and power to speak back.

In the library, I developed a feminist consciousness with Simone de Beauvoir and later transformed that consciousness with the works of feminists of colour, like bell hooks. Reading shaped a way of looking at the world with nuance and endless possibility, a world full of histories and meaning that impacted the present day. Instead of being accidents, I learned our current social realities and relationships had patterns and threads. They were deliberate creations that benefited some at the expense of others. This knowledge was like X-ray glasses, revealing and opening the world to me as a myriad ways of living and seeing and being.

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**"We can sit in our corners mute forever while our sisters and ourselves are wasted, while our earth is poisoned. We can sit our safe corners mute as bottles; and we will be no less afraid. The decision is to define ourselves and speak for ourselves, instead of being defined and spoken for by others."**

**Audre Lorde**

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So much of my memoir *Desi Girl: on feminism, race, faith, and belonging* is about that period of my life, the UTS years when I moved out of home, when I struggled financially, when I became an independent person. And most importantly it's where I began to have a consciousness and an idea of how I wanted to live my life, what mattered to me, what I wanted to be guided by and a spirituality that spoke to me.

The university was a precious space for me – an incubation, a reprieve, a place where instead of a





**Sarah Malik**

traditional thesis I created an online feminist website predicting that digital journalism would transform society.

I connected to the imaginary, I dreamed of possibilities because the books I read, ones that felt as real as my hand and heart, were also acts of imaginations that becomes tangible things in the world.

Years later, now in my 30s, I still don't pretend to have the answers. But I know that empowerment begins by becoming comfortable with not having a place, but being in the in-between place where things don't always fit.

It is these secret worlds that opened up for me that have sustained and shaped me.

Today I am the writer I dreamed of being and that happened by refusing to be silent. Today I write and my words and feelings matter, they are read and considered by others. They are maybe a tiny drop of colour in a river of social narrative that changes the constitution of the whole, just by existing.

I wrote my memoir because I am the first in my family to have the privilege of writing a new story for myself, of literacy, of going to university, of choosing a life for myself. I think about so many women and girls who are denied that opportunity, people in my own extended family. I think about how history loops around and repeats itself.

I think of Palestinian women trying to protect their children, surviving every day under occupation. I think of women in Iran tear-gassed in the street for fighting against police brutality and right to dress how they please. I think of women in the US stripped of their right to bodily autonomy where books are now routinely banned. I think of Afghanistan, a new regime

that begins its old assault on women and denies them the power that access to knowledge brings. I think of trans women who face continued discrimination for just existing. I think of First Nations women who daily navigate a society that has systemically taken so much from them. I think about so many women whose lives are circumscribed by those who want to deny them autonomy, voice, and the power that knowledge and education brings.

This is why authoritarian regimes ban books. It is why extremists target female schools. Art and knowledge create questions, sow doubts and wonder, light a path to an unknown place. A girl who reads is a girl with ideas. And a girl with ideas is a powerful girl. In a world where control over women can be either subtly or violently enforced, from conformity to social ideals to rigid laws circumscribing physical control, it is the rebellious mind that has the potential to be the biggest threat.

It made me realise how, despite it all, women rise. We create art, we create music, we create families, we run businesses, we lead companies, we work at factories, we are professors and students, we volunteer at schools, mosques and churches and synagogues. We lend our time, energy, and care to power our communities and the world we live in, often unpaid without the recognition and credit we deserve.

For me rising and finding my voice has always happened through words. Education helped me know another world was possible and writing helped me feel like I existed.

I know the fight is never over but has new manifestations. I don't experience the challenges my mother did but different ones that still matter. The pay gap, the structural racism in our politics, arts, media, and powerful institutions that still, in 2023, are largely led by men and people of Anglo-Saxon background. The tokenism, micro-aggressions, indignities and lack of respect we can experience as we try to make our ascent in a country that often tells us we don't belong; that we're not good enough; of feeling always secondary even in spaces that propose to be for us. The white feminist voices who dominate and don't make space for us; whose words can often be loaded by unconscious white privilege. The progressive who is there to help only as long as you remain servile or one down and don't eclipse them.

I think about how words can illuminate and reveal, and they can dazzle and obscure, too. They can empower and disempower. I think about how I wanted to use my words and how they were the escape tunnel in those early days. By telling my story in my own words, I reclaimed myself.

**Sarah Malik is a Walkley-award winning Australian investigative journalist, author and television presenter. Her work focuses on asylum, surveillance, technology and its intersection with gender and race – most notably examining domestic violence, gender inequality and migration. This is an excerpt of her speech.**

## “No Veils, No Oppression!” Watching from a distance as women fight for freedom in Iran

A bonfire in Tehran. Women dancing around it. Arms outspread, heads held high, gyrating like whirling dervishes. Yet, there is something different about this. It isn't in spiritual ecstasy that these women whirl, sweeping the headscarves off their hair. It isn't a call to divinity that they laugh and chant, frolic to the fire. It isn't to receive holy beneficence that their hands turn, weightless, flinging the hijabs into the flames. Report by **Sahar Delijani**.

This isn't a ritual in remembrance of God. It isn't an act of becoming one with the divine spirit. In this early evening in Tehran, surrounded by an applauding audience and the fire that burns buoyant and free accompanying their dance, these whirling women are in the midst of a revolution.

You're alone. Dusk has fallen. The only thing that glows, lighting up your face is the screen of your phone. You're watching the fire. You're watching the women. You're not one of these women. You're far from them. Thousands of miles of deep blue ocean. Days pass.

The women's whirling dance has transformed into countrywide protests, a wildfire of “Death to Dictator!”, “Freedom Freedom Freedom!” and “I will kill whoever killed my sister!” Now when you watch the videos, there are not only women protesting but men too. Not only the young but the elderly too. Not just Tehran but Kurdistan, Zahedan, Khuzestan, Isfahan, Shiraz. Not just the cities but towns and villages. Not just the students but workers and teachers and singers and writers taking to the street against a violent, corrupt, theocratic, patriarchal dictatorship.

These are my people, you keep muttering to yourself. I am one of them. What do I do now? How do I respond? What is my responsibility? What is my role?

It's a starry night.

The internet has been shut down for months and what you see are videos sent painstakingly through different VPNs from protestors in Iran. You don't know their names. Most times, you don't even see their faces as for safety reasons they're either covered or are being recorded from the back. You know they risk their lives by being in these videos, by recording them, even by sending them. And all you can do is watch. At least to watch. You want to keep them safe. You want to keep them alive.

You feel like there is a lifeline connecting you to them, a lifeline of history and songs and late-night stories and collective memory and poetry and embraces and grandparents and date stones and solidarity and defiance and the hope of one day



**Sahar Delijani**

hearing the receding echo of boots and batons in the streets when a dictatorship is toppled.

That is your connection. That is what pulsates over the oceans and reaches you, enfolds you. You're one of them, you think. You feel it so deeply, you stop living your life. The one you've built far away from them. The one you've struggled for and have come to know far better than the one unfolding in those brief videos. But it matters no longer. This is about life and death. It's about the future. It's about breaking free. And those in the videos, those chanting and dying and rising are telling you to forget everything else and choose them.

Five months have passed. You're exhausted. You cannot sleep. You live in a constant state of alarm, helplessness and grief. Your thoughts cannot go anywhere but to the spilt blood on the streets, to the packed prisons, the gunshots, the torture, to women blinded by rubber bullets during protests, to bodies turning up in rivers, to kidnappings and abductions, to executions and shattered families, to the senseless suffering and violence the regime in its desperate



## Revolution in Iran

attempt at survival has unleashed on the population.

If this is not a revolutionary cry, what is? A mother buries her son swearing she will not back down, swearing she will stand to the end.

In the past five months, almost 20,000 protestors have been jailed, tortured, interrogated. Over 500 gunned down by security forces, 70 of them children. Four protestors have been executed charged with crimes of “waging war against God” and “corruption on Earth.” Hundreds face the death penalty charged with similar crimes.

And yet, despite all the pain, the fire keeps burning. The sparks keep twirling.

And you cannot keep away.

A mother bangs on a prison door demanding to see her daughter, “You’ll have to take my dead body away from here! Let me see my child!” A father dances in the graveyard, bidding the wish of his martyred son. A sister chops off her hair. A brother calls on everyone to not be silent. “Your silence will be the noose around the neck of this land’s children!” Students stage sit-ins, take over university auditoriums, singing freedom songs, “Our darkest night will become dawn!” Supporters drive to prisons in solidarity with families waiting to get news of their loved ones behind bars.

The parents of a young man hanged by the regime lays flowers on the grave of another executed victim, who does not have a family of his own to bring him flowers. At the funerals of killed protesters, thousands join to pay homage. No one wails funerary songs anymore. Now they applaud. Now the mother of a killed protestor holds the photo of her child aloft and chants, “We swear to the blood of our comrades / We will stand to the end!” The mourners chant along with her.

At the funerals of killed protesters, thousands join to pay homage. No one wails funerary songs anymore. Now they applaud.

If this is not a revolutionary cry, what is? A mother buries her son swearing she will not back down, swearing she will stand to the end. You realize the question is not

whether what is happening in Iran is a revolution or not. The question is whether you will stand by this woman and her courage. Whether you will stand by her dead son.

You wonder how it was when you lived a normal life. You wonder how it felt to live without death and courage and glory constantly breathing the same air as you, breaking bread with you every morning. You wonder what it is that you live for. What are your priorities in life?

A witness. That is what you have become. There to keep watch, to bear testimony when everything else is out of reach. At times, you wish you could be there with them, in those booming streets, submitting to the audacity of the crowd. But you cannot go back. For so many reasons. And you’re too ashamed to name them, to choose a word for your shortcomings.

Yet, all is not lost. You’re not alone. You’re not unarmed. You have language, movement, media, speech. You have memory, history, past and present. There is a revolution in the making, and you must rush to make impressions of its traces, its familiar faces. You must learn to listen to its heartbeat, memorize it, keep it safe. For, this is for you too. This struggle. It encompasses your life, your freedom, your beliefs, your dreams of a better world. There is nothing abstract about it, nothing apart.

It is about you, about all of you, and how far you’re willing to go to ensure another’s wellbeing, to protect another’s dignity. This is what those women and men rising to tyranny have done. This is what they will do. Save you from a life of resignation and despair. From a life of thinking there is no alternative to inequity, no path out of injustice. It is their gift to you, and you shall accept it with humility, and let them take you away and make you part of the grand cycle of the unrelenting human strife for freedom.

**Sahar Delijani is the author of *Children of the Jacaranda Tree*, an autobiographical novel that has been translated into 30 languages. Born in Iran in 1983, she grew up in California and lived for many years in Turin, Italy. She currently lives in New York City.**



# I don't know the person I have become

**Ghezal Kiyanoosh** is a journalist and academic and a member of PEN Afghanistan. When Kabul fell to the Taliban, her life was in grave danger and she fled to a safe house. In those frantic days in August 2022, members of PEN Sydney sent her messages of support on Signal, while we worked on getting her out of Afghanistan. With our support she eventually fled to Germany with her husband, photographer Shiwa Kiyanoosh and their two small children. In Wolfsburg she is now safe from the Taliban but the transition to her new life, learning a new language and overcoming the trauma of having to leave all that she knew behind has been challenging.

I don't know the person I have become. The one who has nothing of her own; like a bird with broken wings who has to build a nest again but doesn't know where to get the feathers from.

I knew so well the me who has been left behind in Afghanistan. She was brave and proud of herself. She had self-confidence and a belief in changing her own destiny. She was strong and believed in struggling and fighting.

This new me has no home, no nest, no peace and nowhere on this earth to stamp her feet and say loudly and proudly that this is my soil, my land, my home. Even Afghanistan is no longer my land.

I am no more the person I used to be and never will be, I can't even find her anymore. Even if I go back to a country called Afghanistan, I won't have that feeling anymore. Even if I could find that part of myself that was lost, we will no longer be one again. It's like two school friends who see each other and remember the friendship that they had once but can no longer be on the same path again, the happiness, carefree days and close connections; because they are not the same people that they used to be; just like that, both my parts have changed.

Before facing these issues and being in this situation I used to talk so optimistically about globalism, cosmopolitanism and World Citizenship Theories, and I saw myself as a person who loved to

travel and anywhere I decided to live would be my home. I would love it, but I would select that place purposefully. Being forced to do so is so different, leaving your homeland in blood and flames, flying away makes you feel so guilty, which means you can't feel happy on the inside.

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**I am no more the person I used to be and never will be, I can't even find her anymore. Even if I go back to a country called Afghanistan, I won't have that feeling anymore. Even if I could find that part of myself that was lost, we will no longer be one again.**

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The new me is so dizzy, she is not as smart as the old me. The new me always feels like she has a bad hangover and all she tries to do is banish this bad feeling, instead seeking calmness and happiness. Well actually not happiness but comfort and relief, satiability. To reach that goal I am always wearing nice dresses, doing my makeup and my hair, my nails, but when I stand in front of the mirror, I just see the dark empty inside which is so dark and



**Ghezel Kiyanoosh struggles to regain a sense of self in a new country.**

deep. I see myself as just a frame, just an empty box.

Whenever someone says that I look pretty, in my head I see a picture of me in the airport, with teary eyes, dry lips, black under my eyes and a face and body full of dust and sand. I can't respond by saying "thank you" or "that's nice of you", I am just silent, the sound of silence inside me is loud, so loud that it hurts my ears.

Sometimes I miss myself and knock on the door of the dark empty room and ask if there is someone there who will answer me back, to break the roar of this silence, but I hear nothing. I beg sometimes for a sound of mine to break this heavy silence, but no one answers. My silence screams at the depth of darkness and I keep missing myself.

But another part of me, from miles away, is calling me for help, the part of me who is inside every single Afghan girl and woman who is dying. They are asking me to do something for them. All the girls who are suffering over there need to be educated using the latest technology, to be empowered, to be able to decide their destiny and in today's technological era this should not be an

impossible ask. I have a plan for them that is too big to explain here but I am working on it. However I need support to help me develop it and make it possible otherwise it will remain just a dream.

I had so many plans I wanted to work on as I was leaving Afghanistan but after arriving in Germany I have faced so many difficulties. The experience of being an immigrant in a totally different society and culture has diminished my confidence. It has forced me to reassess and taught me to learn to accept this new me, to slow down the process of internal struggle.

**This is an extract from a memoir Ghezel Kiyanoosh is writing. You can listen to her two part podcast about her escape from Afghanistan on the ABC's Earshot podcast under the heading, *The Kabul Diaries*.**

# Turkish journalist Hatice Duman says no hope of her release after 20 years in prison

**Hatice Duman** is Turkey's longest-serving gaoled journalist. Now 50, she has been behind bars since April 9, 2003, 20 years into a life sentence on charges including propaganda and being a member of the banned Marxist Leninist Communist Party (MLKP).

**H**atice Duman is Turkey's longest-serving gaoled journalist. Now 50, she has been behind bars since April 9, 2003, 20 years into a life sentence on charges including propaganda and being a member of the banned Marxist Leninist Communist Party (MLKP).

Ms Duman, a former editor for the socialist Turkish weekly *Atılım*, has denied the charges and the Committee to Protect Journalists, which reviewed the available court records of her trial, believes them to be unsubstantiated. Turkey's Constitutional Court found that her right to a fair trial had been violated and twice ordered a retrial. Ms Duman, meanwhile, remains at the Bakırköy Women's Prison in Istanbul and holds out little hope that the retrial – already several hearings in – will bring her freedom.

In November, Beril Eski, a lawyer and journalist, spoke to her on behalf of the Committee to Protect Journalists about her conviction, her life in prison, her hope of returning to journalism – and her reaction to a recent raid where prison officials confiscated coats, blankets, books, her radio, the personal diary she has kept for 20 years, court documents regarding her trial, and even her desk and blank pieces of paper. Ms Duman said she and other prisoners were dragged on the floor during the raid and that she spent four days in isolation afterward.

The interview, translated from Turkish, has been lightly edited for clarity and length.

**Beril Eski: Tell us about your arrest, interrogation, trial, and conviction process? Were you mistreated or tortured?**

Was it really a court of law or was the verdict already decided? The trial lasted for 10 years. The sentencing was done three months shy of 10 years because the statute of limitations would have come into effect, and we would have been released if 10 years were past [with no conviction]. Then the case went back and forth

to the Constitutional Court of Turkey.

I was kept awake for four days in [police] custody. The interrogation lasted day and night. I had hallucinations. I was conscious, there was no physical torture, but they did not let me sleep; [they] probably drugged me. I asked for a blood test from the medical staff. My stomach was hurting a lot and was making sounds. But the medics insistently refused to do a blood test.

I did not testify during [police] custody. They wanted me to sign a statement they had prepared; I refused. It was the same at the prosecutor's office, too. I refused the prosecutor, he punched me, attacked me. I still did not sign. We filed criminal complaints to the court but did not get any results.

**What is the status of your retrial?**

Three hearings were held since the second retrial. I wanted to attend the sessions in person, but my request was denied. I attended through teleconference [and] my request to be released was denied anyway.

My conviction needs to be overturned but it does not get done. I have served 20 years; my family is waiting for me to be released. I offered my defence [to the court] but I'm not sure if it was looked at. They are trying to have me identified by witnesses about events I had nothing to do with. I do not have a hope for being released anymore. I do not get my hopes up because otherwise I couldn't manage to carry on in prison.

[Editor's note: The fourth hearing of Ms Duman's retrial, which included several defendants, was heard by the 12th Istanbul Court of Serious Crimes on December 9. It lasted two-and-a-half hours and did not address any of the charges against her. Ms Duman, who attended by teleconference, told the court that the confiscation of her legal documents during the prison raid had violated her right to prepare for her defence. The court denied her request to be released pending trial and set the date for the next hearing for March 31, 2023.]





**Turkish journalist Hatice Duman (right), during a visit with a family member in Bakırköy Prison in 2016. Duman is serving a life sentence. (Photo courtesy Duman family)**

**You have been convicted on very serious charges of terrorism. Why do you think you were targeted?**

I'm a socialist journalist. The only evidence in the case against me is the testimony of my ex-husband. They made him testify by telling him that they would rape me otherwise. He [later] renounced his testimony, told [the court] that I was not involved [in what I was accused of.] The evidence supported what he said, but the court disregarded it. We were given the harshest sentences. Police have told me that I wouldn't leave the prison [until I was old enough] to walk with a stick if I didn't sign their prepared testimony. [Under Turkish law, a life sentence without parole is 30 years.]

**Describe Atılım to us?**

Atılım is a socialist magazine that I was reading since my college years. I started to work as a reporter there after college and then made news editor. We always have been systematically oppressed. I was taken into [police] custody during my first field assignment. Being taken into custody and oppression never stopped. I was in court every week. I continued to write [about politics] for Atılım [from prison] until I stopped because of other work. I'm also facing charges of writing [terrorist] propaganda for two of my latest articles.

**How is your health?**

I suffer from hypertension and arrhythmia. They are currently giving me my medicine but there is no regular monitoring [or] follow-up. I have not been given a device to measure my blood pressure. I have had hypertension for 20 years; [authorities] were

more concerned [about the prisoners] 10 years ago. My [blood] pressure has increased, especially in the last five years [but] there has been trouble with going to the infirmary. For example, I have trouble with my ear and I experience balance problems. However, I cannot get examined for that. Hospital visits are made in handcuffs and the soldier [who accompanies the prisoner] enters the exam room. You cannot get examined because the soldier is there. It is not just about being naked, there is an ethical understanding about privacy in doctor-patient relations.

**How do you spend an ordinary day in prison?**

I don't have much of a routine although I want to have one. I have breakfast in the morning. I listen to the news from Açık Radio. I do work; I read books. We exercise during meal breaks, sometimes we play volleyball. Birthday celebrations happen, sometimes I help arrange activities. I wanted to take a calligraphy class, but I wasn't allowed. We all wanted to take a Zumba [dance] course but they do not allow us any such activities, I don't know why. The ordinary prisoners [those not convicted on terror-related charges] are allowed to attend concerts and activities. There was an activity organised for the ordinary prisoners on the day of the raid. They were playing music to them while raiding us.

**How are your prison conditions?**

We're a 36-prisoner ward and there have been times that we've had 36 people here. We are 12 now. This used to be a jail [as well as a prison], which meant those already convicted were with people still awaiting trial. I was able [then] to connect with different people from the outside. It was good because otherwise I would forget about the outside. But jailed people do not come here anymore, so I don't have that now.

**What do you want to do when you're free? Do you want to practice journalism again?**

I would want to practice journalism very much. Twenty years in prison is a very long time. I am very angry at the system. But I would want to do journalism.

I get forgetful about the outside. For example, I missed photography a lot. I asked for my camera many times, they won't give it. I don't even have a desk, let alone a camera. I would do things that I have missed the most when I'm out. Unless my family locks me in (laughs).

I would be me when I get out, as I am here. I cannot stand inequity and injustice. I'm studying. I have graduated from [an] international relations [course], now I'm studying Islamic sciences at the open university. However, there is a problem about books and resources. We have a limit of seven books at a time and you wait two months for a new book.

# They clicked once. Then came the dark prisons.

Every political prisoner's case is a travesty of justice. Freedom of expression, association and belief are not crimes. The most powerful answer is to shine a spotlight on plight of political prisoners and make sure they are not forgotten. This special report is by *The Washington Post's* editors.

**D**anuta Perednya was arrested and sentenced to six and a half years in prison. Salma al-Shehab was sentenced to 34 years in prison and to a 34-year travel ban. Olesya Krivtsova has been added to a list of terrorists and extremists, charged with discrediting the military and put under house arrest, and she is facing seven years in prison. They all are being punished by despotic regimes for nothing more than posting or reposting something on social media.

That's all — a click.

They are hardly alone. The world's political prisons are bulging. A string of popular uprisings over the past few years brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to the streets, protesting against authoritarianism in Hong Kong, Cuba, Belarus and Iran; against the military junta that toppled democracy in Myanmar; and against strict restrictions on speech and protest in Russia and China. Also, Arab Spring uprisings swept Egypt, Syria and elsewhere a decade ago, and protests broke out in Vietnam in 2018. Most of these protests were met with mass crackdowns and arrests. Thousands of participants — largely young and demonstrating for the first time — have been held in prison for demanding the right to speak and think freely and to choose their leaders.

Authoritarian regimes often work in the shadows, using secret police to threaten dissidents, censor the media, prohibit travel or choke off internet access. But when prisons are jam-packed with thousands who simply marched down the street or sent a tweet, the repression is no longer hidden; it is a bright, pulsating signal that freedom is in distress.

Political prisons are, sadly, not new. During the 20th century, the practice of mass repression grew to immense proportions in Joseph Stalin's gulag system of forced labour camps. Political prisons have been notorious in Fidel Castro's Cuba; Saddam Hussein's Iraq; Cold War East Germany; apartheid South



**On Feb. 27, 2022, Danuta Perednya, a 21-year old university student, reposted a message on the social media app Telegram criticising Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko for the war in Ukraine.**

Africa; North Korea; and, in recent years, in China's Xinjiang region.

According to the classic definition, formulated by Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1956, a totalitarian dictatorship is characterised by an ideology, a single party led by one person,

a terroristic police, government control of all communications, a weapons monopoly and a centrally controlled economy. In today's world, fewer authoritarian states run a command economy. But many embrace the other characteristics. The political prisons are where the threads come together, punishing those who challenge a regime's monopoly on power.

In earlier times, dissidents carried placards, issued manifestoes, staged strikes and engaged in public demonstrations. In one famous case, in August 1968, eight demonstrators took to Moscow's Red Square to protest the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in order to suppress the Prague Spring. "For your freedom and ours!" read one banner. Within minutes, the KGB tore down the banners and arrested the protesters. When dissenters were not easily found, the secret police still were on the prowl; the East German Ministry of State Security, known as the Stasi, developed an elaborate system to anticipate dissent and snuff it out. Neighbours informed on neighbours. Living under dictators usually meant living in fear.

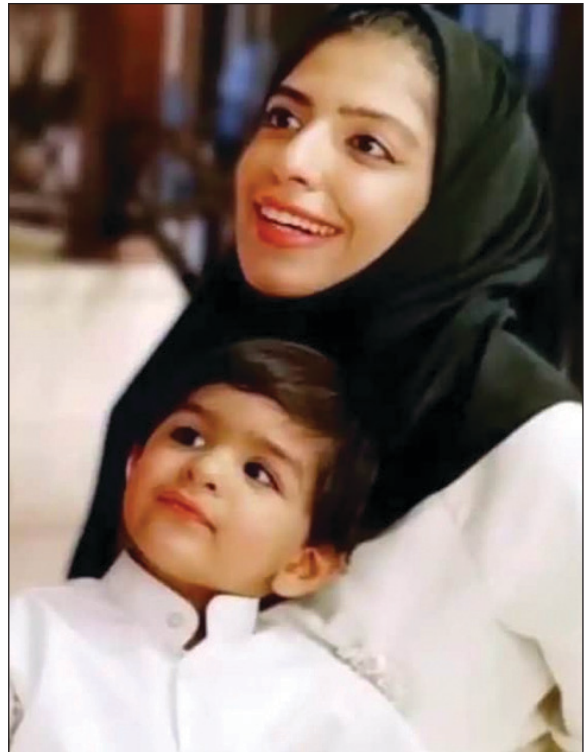
Then came the digital revolution. The Internet appeared to be the ultimate antidote to autocracy. It was open, decentralised, beyond a state's control; it was global and empowered hundreds of millions of people to speak their minds without fear of retribution. Even when a prosperous and rising China sought to close itself off from the global Internet with a Great Firewall and vast censorship, the digital byways still erupted periodically with fury and criticism. The world didn't change overnight — fear of speaking out still lingered for many. But for a time, free speech began to outpace the ability of government to control it.

According to Freedom on the Net 2022, published by Freedom House, between June 2021 and May 2022, authorities in 40 countries blocked social, political or religious content online, an all-time high. Social media has made people feel as though they can speak openly, but technological tools also allow autocrats to target individuals.

Social media users leave traces: words, locations, contacts, network links. Protesters are betrayed by the phones in their pockets. Regimes criminalised free speech and expression on social media, prohibiting "insulting the president" (Belarus), "picking quarrels and provoking trouble" (China), "discrediting the military" (Russia) or "public disorder" (Cuba).

Ms Perednya's case is chilling. She was an honours student at Belarus's Mogilev State University. Three days after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, she reposted, in a chat on Telegram, another person's harsh criticism of Mr Putin and Mr Lukashenko, calling for street protests and saying Belarus's army should not enter the conflict.

She was arrested the next day while getting off a bus to attend classes. Judges have twice upheld



**On Dec. 28, 2020, a young Saudi woman, Salma al-Shehab, tweeted an appeal to release Loujain al-Hathloul, an activist who was in prison for seeking the right of women to drive in the kingdom.**

her sentence on charges of "causing damage to the national interests of Belarus" and "insulting the president."

In Saudi Arabia, Ms Shehab's tweet was a simple hashtag, #FreeLoujain. It was a reference to Loujain al-Hathloul, the women's rights activist who was at the time imprisoned for demanding the right to drive. Ms Shehab was detained in January 2021 and initially charged with trying to "disturb public order and destabilize the security and stability of the state." Later, prosecutors said she should be charged under counterterrorism and cybercrime statutes and was given the horrific 34-year sentence. Her two sons were four and six years old when she was detained, and she has not seen them in two years. Ms Hathloul was released from prison just weeks after Ms Shehab was arrested.

Of all countries in the world, however, China remains the most repressive. It has used prison camps since the early days of the People's Republic, as depicted in the 1973 memoir *Prisoner of Mao*, by Bao Ruo-Wang. He was labelled a counter-revolutionary and sent to forced labour camps in the late 1950s. At one point, he was handcuffed and stuffed into a coffin-like cell not large enough to stand in, with a dirty blanket, a wooden bucket for a





**In October, a 19-year-old Russian university student, Olesya Krivtsova, posted an Instagram story criticising Russia's war in Ukraine. Her fellow students at Northern Federal University, in the northern city of Arkhangelsk, took a screenshot of the Instagram story — and reported her to the authorities.**

latrine and a light bulb that never went off.

Today, Chinese authorities deploy multiple types of coercion and repression: the forced incarceration of more than 1 million Uyghurs, many of them in bleak concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire; a long-running campaign against the religious group Falun Gong and unofficial Christian churches; targeted punishment for dissent; and a relentless attempt to censor the internet.

It is clear that the government's highly sophisticated surveillance system — including facial recognition and even technology that can identify a person by their gait — is zeroing in on dissent and protest.

The worldwide toll of this sort of 21st-century authoritarianism is growing. Over the past four years, just four uprisings in various parts of the world have led to nearly 18,000 people being arrested and incarcerated. In Belarus, mass demonstrations erupted after Mr Lukashenko stole an August 2020 election. The number of political prisoners in Belarus has soared from a handful to

1,441 now. In Myanmar, or Burma, citizens are fighting a military coup that overthrew its young democracy in February 2021. There are 13,884 political prisoners there today. In Cuba, on July 11, 2021, a massive and spontaneous street protest broke out across the island, and more than 1,000 have been arrested in its wake. In Hong Kong, there were only a handful of political prisoners in 2019, when protests erupted against China's increasingly authoritarian rule; now, there are 1,337. Another 20,000 people have been detained in Iran since protests began there in September. A young Iranian couple were recently sentenced to five years in prison each after a video went viral on Instagram of them dancing in public, the woman without a head covering.

Many of these prisoners are young. In Hong Kong, about three-fourths of those given prison time are under the age of 30; more than half are under 25. In Cuba, the average age is 32. The situation is similar in Myanmar and Belarus. In Russia, the share of women taking to the streets has risen dramatically in recent years. Women accounted for as much as 31 percent of the crowd in 2021 rallies for Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny; after the Kremlin announced mobilisations of men for the Ukraine war, women made up 51 percent and 71 percent of the crowd at rallies on Sept. 21 and Sept. 24, respectively.

Protesters and dissidents need help to evade government controls. Free countries can develop and spread encryption software that protects their digital communications, as well as tools allowing people to circumvent government internet blockages, snooping and tracking. In times of conflict, helping besieged demonstrators stay online and spread the word can be vital, for example by deploying mobile internet technology such as the Starlink terminals used in Ukraine, Iran and elsewhere.

But as authoritarian regimes evolve and adapt to such measures, protesters will require new methods and tools to help them keep their causes alive — before the prison door clangs shut. It is a job not only for democratic governments, but for citizens, universities, nongovernmental organisations, civic groups and, especially, technology companies to figure out how to help in places such as Belarus and Hong Kong, where a powerful state has thrown hundreds of demonstrators into prison without a second thought, or to find new ways to keep protest alive in surveillance-heavy dystopias such as China.

***The Washington Post* editorial board covers areas of focus such as opinion, national politics, legal affairs, energy, the environment, health care, European affairs, foreign affairs, national security, economics, technology and society. This is an abridged version. The full report may be found at: [washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2023/political-protest-new-generation-faces/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/interactive/2023/political-protest-new-generation-faces/)**

# International Mother Language Day: a necessity to transform education

Globally 40 per cent of the population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand. But progress is being made in multilingual education with growing understanding of its importance, particularly in early schooling, and more commitment to its development in public life.



International Mother Language Day 2023, celebrated on February 21, recognises that languages and multilingualism can advance inclusion, and the Sustainable Development Goals' focus on leaving no one behind. UNESCO encourages and promotes multilingual education based on mother tongue or first language. It is a type of education that begins in the language that the learner masters most and then gradually introduces other languages.

This approach enables learners whose mother tongue is different from the language of instruction to bridge the gap between home and school, to discover the school environment in a familiar language, and thus, learn better.

Multilingualism contributes to the development of inclusive societies that allow multiple cultures, worldviews and knowledge systems to coexist and cross-fertilise.

This year, the theme of International Mother Language Day, "Multilingual education – a necessity to transform education" aligns with recommendations for an emphasis to be placed on Indigenous people's education and languages.

The event, hosted by UNESCO, explored the following main themes:

Enhancing multilingual education as a necessity to transform education in multilingual contexts from early childhood education and well beyond;

Supporting learning through multilingual education and multilingualism in our fast-changing global contexts and in crisis situations including emergencies contexts; Revitalising languages that are disappearing or are threatened with extinction.

Languages, with their complex implications for identity, communication, social integration, education and development, are of strategic importance for people and planet. Yet, due to globalisation processes, they are

increasingly under threat, or disappearing altogether. When languages fade, so does the world's rich tapestry of cultural diversity. Opportunities, traditions, memory, unique modes of thinking and expression — valuable resources for ensuring a better future — are also lost.

Every two weeks a language disappears taking with it an entire cultural and intellectual heritage. At least 43 per cent of the estimated 6000 languages spoken in the world are endangered. Only a few hundred languages have genuinely been given a place in education systems and the public domain, and less than a hundred are used in the digital world.

Today there is growing awareness that languages play a vital role in development, in ensuring cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, but also in strengthening co-operation and attaining quality education for all, in building inclusive knowledge societies and preserving cultural heritage, and in mobilizing political will for applying the benefits of science and technology to sustainable development.

The International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) aims to ensure Indigenous peoples' right to preserve, revitalise and promote their languages. It offers an opportunity to collaborate in the areas of policy development and stimulate a global dialogue and to take necessary measures for the usage, preservation, revitalisation and promotion of indigenous languages around the world.

International days and weeks are occasions to educate the public on issues of concern, to mobilise political will and resources to address global problems, and to celebrate and reinforce achievements of humanity. The existence of international days predates the establishment of the United Nations, but the United Nations has embraced them as a powerful advocacy tool.

# How Annie Ernaux captures the spirit of her era

**In Conversation with Alison L. Strayer, the translator of *Look at the Lights, My Love*, as presented by LitHub.**

Alison L. Strayer is an award-winning writer and translator. Her work has been shortlisted twice for the Governor's General Award for Literature and for Translation. Her translation of Annie Ernaux's *The Years* was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2019 and won the French-American Translation Prize in the nonfiction category as well as the Warwick Prize for Women in Translation, honouring both author and translator.

**T**ell us about your experience as Annie Ernaux's longtime translator. When did you first encounter her work, and what drew you to it?

I have translated the books of Annie Ernaux for seven years. The first was *Les Années* (*The Years*), starting at the end of 2015.

The very first time I encountered her work was in 1992, when I was still living in Montreal. I was given *Passion simple* as part of a script-editing job. The filmmaker-screenwriter had been very inspired by *Passion simple* (though the film was not based on the book) and he wanted his film to have the same "feel" as Ernaux's writing. *Passion simple* is the first book in which Annie Ernaux relates her relationship with a married Soviet diplomat; *Getting Lost* is the diary of the two-odd years that affair lasted.

I read *Passion simple* in one sitting. The story spoke to me, and I was struck by how spare the writing was. I wondered throughout how she managed to tell the story of that fraught situation with such directness and economy—and no melodrama.

With every book by Annie Ernaux I read thereafter, I continued to ask myself, "How did she do that?" I appreciated and was fascinated by the author's simultaneous endeavour to tell the story, and seek a way of telling it which will allow her to get as near as possible to "what happened."

Last but not least, on reading *Passion simple* in 1992 I was very curious as to how it would read in English. I tried translating a few paragraphs and discovered that there was a big difference between translating the words and capturing a voice.

With *The Years*, this part of the work was, in my perception, similar to laying down one stone next to

another on the ground — stone after stone (marking out, perhaps, a wall) and the stones were words.

I didn't read Tanya Leslie's wonderful translation of that book, and others, for another eight years or so.

**How do you balance direct translation and artistic rendering in your translations?**

With every book I've translated in the past 15 years, I have aimed for "closeness to the original" (though that is probably a very tired turn of phrase). This said, I'm aware that the notion of "closeness to the original" can be — is — interpreted in different ways by different translators. It is always interesting to see how each approaches the question.

I start by doing a very basic rendering (which I continually refer to, along with the original text, for a very long time in the process).

I adhere to the sentence structure of the original, choosing words — say, nouns — of the same register, or even length of those in the original (that is, I try not to fancy them up, though spontaneously I may have another word in mind). I end up with a sort of "footprint" (as you might say of a house you had torn down or were going to put up), an imprint, as a starting point. For instance, with *The Years*, this part of the work was, in my perception, similar to laying down one stone next to another on the ground—stone after stone (marking out, perhaps, a wall) and the stones were words.

**What was it like to translate *Look at the Lights, My Love*?**

*Look at the Lights, My Love* is a journal of observations containing a wealth of very precise descriptions — of the premises, including its design, methods of entry, exit and circulation,





Annie Ernaux (Sophie Bassouls/Getty Images)

the merchandise and its staging, the customers (different depending on the day and the time of day), the frequent and spectacular changes in décor, promotions, etc. over the many holidays, seasons and special events of the year (including, for example, Chinese New Year and Ramadan).

The primary function of the book is to convey information — to serve as a record — and this dictated the approach to translation. Precision is very important.

I also very much enjoyed doing the research for the specialised vocabulary e.g., shopping centre design, the checkout robot-voice scripts, the precise wording of warning signs, the names most commonly used for products and departments, promotional buzzwords and so on.

***Look at the Lights, My Love* is a meditation on the big-box superstore as “a great human meeting place, a spectacle.” How does this meditation differ from Ernaux’s autobiographical work?**

First of all, this is a very autobiographical work. It simply explores a different approach to

autobiography. (Ernaux sometimes calls auto-socio-biographie.)

*Look at the Lights, My Love* has very clear family ties with other works in the Ernaux oeuvre, for example, two earlier “journaux extimes,” to borrow the expression of Michel Tournier — “journals of the outside.” The titles of those earlier books are *Exteriors* and *Things Seen*. Unlike the inward-focused journal intime (a personal diary) the journal extime is outwardly focused, captures something of the times, of life as it is lived collectively, but of course, it also inevitably paints a portrait of the person who’s writing down the details of that outside world.

In *Look at the Lights My Love*, Ernaux reflects, “We choose our objects and our places of memory, or rather the spirit of the times decides what is worth remembering.” She goes on to wonder at the fact that superstores are only starting to be recognized as “places worthy of representation” in books, films, etc. and recalls numerous scenes from her own life that have taken place in big-box superstores and shopping malls.

**Do your experiences in big-box superstores resonate with Ernaux's? What emotions or thoughts have big-box superstores evoked for you?**

Definitely. For most of my life I have been a city walker, and certain stores or shopping centres or shopping streets have provided the necessary incentive or sense of anticipation to get me out of the apartment after a work day to make the transition between inside and outside.

(Annie Ernaux writes about this in *Look at the Lights, My Love* — stopping by Trois-Fontaines shopping centre and Auchan is a treat and sort of celebration when the writing day has gone well. During solitary sojourns in other towns where she has gone to write, a trip to a shopping centre is her moment of reuniting with the world, etc.)

The kind of big-store flânerie which Ernaux describes in *Look at the Lights, My Love* is very compatible, I find, with translating. I sometimes find myself testing out a problem sentence or word in a different way when my consciousness is the way it is in a vast commercial space — partly neutral, even slightly dazed, partly engaged by a specific sight or object, and sometimes, if only distractedly, still working, though with more leisure than when I am at my desk.

In *Look at the Lights My Love*, Ernaux reflects, “We choose our objects and our places of memory, or rather the spirit of the times decides what is worth remembering.” She goes on to wonder at the fact that superstores are only starting to be recognized as “places worthy of representation” in books, films, etc. and recalls numerous scenes from her own life that have taken place in big-box superstores and shopping malls.

**Where is your favourite place to read a new book by Ernaux?**

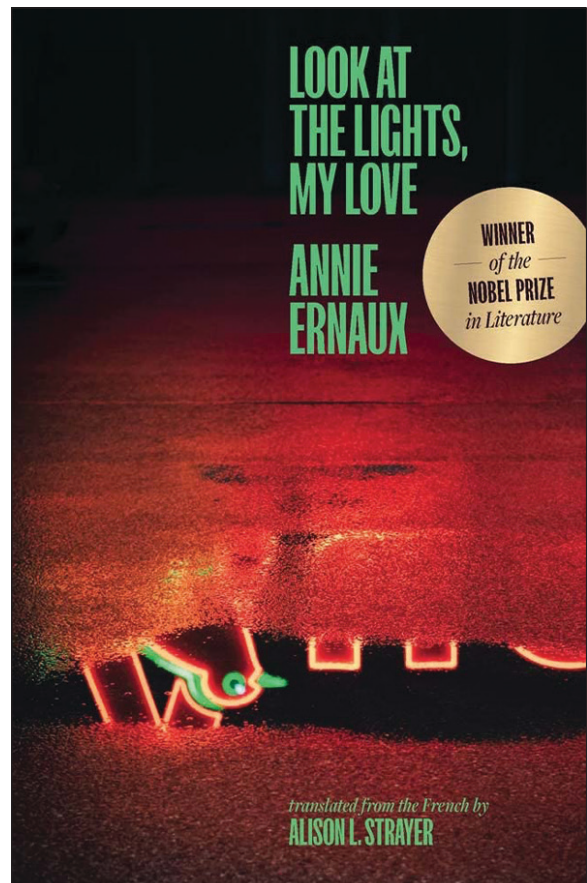
My favourite place to read Annie Ernaux is in the Paris metro or commuter trains, or on long bus rides. So many scenes in Ernaux's books take place in and around metros and trains and stations.

**In 2022, Annie Ernaux received the Nobel Prize for Literature. She was the 17th woman out 119 laureates in the award's history. What impact do you hope her award will have on women writers and translators around the world?**

In the books of Annie Ernaux, there is a palpable, deeply felt connection between women's rights and women's writing.

In her Nobel lecture she wrote: “This commitment through which I pledge myself in writing is supported by the belief, which has become a certainty, that a book can contribute to change in private life, help to shatter the loneliness of experiences endured and repressed, and enable beings to reimagine themselves. When the unspeakable is brought to light, it is political.

“We see it today in the revolt of women who have



found the words to disrupt male power and who have risen up, as in Iran, against its most archaic form. Writing in a democratic country, however, I continue to wonder about the place women occupy in the literary field. They have not yet gained legitimacy as producers of written works. There are men in the world, including the Western intellectual spheres, for whom books written by women simply do not exist; they never cite them. The recognition of my work by the Swedish Academy is a sign of hope for all female writers.”

I feel that Annie Ernaux's recognition by the Swedish Academy will have a positive impact on women's writing and its translation, with the participation of an increasing number of publishers (I believe) who are open to hearing from, or who are actively looking for these authors, works, and translators.

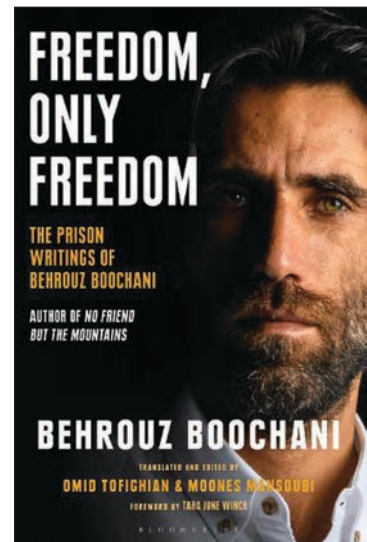
**Annie Ernaux's *Look at the Lights, My Love* is published by Yale University Press in its Margellos World Republic of Letters translation series.**

**Sydney PEN supports the NSW Premier's Literary Awards Translation prize.**



# Words and images that escaped from prison

In 2019, Peter Dutton, then Home Affairs Minister, said Kurdish asylum seeker Behrouz Boochani, who spent six years detained on Manus Island and was finally on his way to freedom in New Zealand, would never set foot in Australia. However, in December last year, Mr Boochani arrived in Australia to promote his second book *Freedom, Only Freedom*. In February, when he was in Canberra to address Parliamentarians about the continuing plight of refugees, he made the comment that Peter Dutton, now Opposition Leader, would never be Australian Prime Minister. By **Kathy Raheb**



Behrouz Boochani made many public appearances and attend many events during his recent visit, including a dinner held by the Kurdish Youth Association in Blacktown, Sydney, in late January attended by members of Sydney PEN.

His appearance at Parliament House was in support of a proposed bill by the Greens Party to see the remaining 150 refugees evacuated from Nauru Island and Papua New Guinea and granted temporary visas in Australia.

He described his presence at Parliament House as "surreal" and an "achievement".

"Our work is to put pressure on this government to see real change, to see real action," Mr Boochani says of his new book, a collection of articles and essays about refugee rights and migration. His writing is, in his words, "a duty to history," and an act of resistance. As an asylum seeker, he was stripped of his identity and known only as MEG45.

"Offshore detention is a legal loophole," he says. "It was conceived to deny refugees access to Australian laws." His goal is to ensure that the general Australian public has knowledge of the horrors of refugee incarceration.

His first book, *No Friend But the Mountains*, published in 2018, is a testimonial narrative that bears witness to the cruelty of offshore detention. It was, he

says, his lifeline to the outside world. A few months after the publication of *No Friend*, Mr Boochani and his translator Omid Tofighian published an essay in which they described an idea described as the Manus Prison Theory.

"Manus," they say, "has its roots in Australia's colonialism mentality – a bureaucratic system – and we can expand it to the marginalised people in the society." Ultimately, Manus Prison Theory is about resistance knowledge created by refugees, and people who are working with refugees, to defy secrecy and gag orders by the amendments to Australian Border Patrol Act.

Behrouz Boochani's work on the Manus Prison Theory exposes its purpose to stifle the pursuit of truth and understanding. The people we meet through the essay reveal embodied individuals rather than nameless victims of a system. This defies the stereotypes that people have of refugees. Mr Boochani refers to one refugee as Hamed Shamshiripour, a gifted musician.

"I knew Hamed through his music. He was inspired by music, he loved to play the guitar and write lyrics. On one occasion he rushed over to see me eager to share a new song but over time, Hamed the musician began to disappear, he was becoming a different person."





**Behrouz Boochani makes it to Parliament House. Image courtesy of Auspic.**

His visits to Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra have seen him speak to sold-out crowds; he says he has found considerable satisfaction in encouraging other refugees to express their voices. "Many refugees feel empowered, many refugees became inspired and feel they can tell their own story, they can write, they can fight," he said.

Through his documentary film, *Chauka, Please Tell Us the Time*, co-directed with Arash Kamali Sarvestani in 2019, he challenges the image of refugees as passive victims.

Voice-over narration describes the experiences of detainees being beaten, watched, filmed constantly and not allowed to sleep. One detainee explains that he was harassed and beaten for 21 days and not given a reason why. A Kurdish refugee sings: "I have lost everything. Oh God, I am fed up with this world. I am scared I may die somewhere far away from home. I wish I were a dove to fly over to you. Only if I had a pair of wings I would fly all across the world. I so desire to be killed by the bullets of the enemy. And so my blood could paint the land of Kurdistan red."

Behrouz Boochani's writing and film making is his way to access hope in the quest for sanctuary. It is his way to defy the system and encourage others to speak out and to do the same. And he has not finished yet. Recently he wrote a series of poems to form the

lyrics set to music composed by Australian singer-songwriter Katie Noonan and performed by a chorus of Tasmanian women and girls for a new adaptation of the play *Women of Troy*, a tragedy by the Greek playwright Euripides, produced in 415 BC. The production was created to raise money and awareness of the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR.

He says revisiting his refugee journey was essential in order to write the poems for this new adaptation. "It was quite difficult emotionally because I had to go through that experience that I had and also all of the stories that I witnessed, the stories that I heard in that context."

The production was part of Tasmania's Ten Days on the Island Arts Festival in March featuring actors from around Australia and New Zealand. It was directed by Ben Winspear and co-produced by actor Marta Dusseldorp.

"One of the reasons that Ben and I were driven to do *Women of Troy* was we do quite a bit of goodwill ambassador work with Australia for UNHCR, so I've been on a few missions to the border of Jordan and Syria," Ms Dusseldorp said.

"In bearing witness to those stories, you really do see the cost of war and displacement, and so for us, theatre is a really good place to explore that and let the general public into the story via fiction."

## A Burmese writer forced to live outside her country confronts her situation with questions that should have simple answers, but don't.

What is your address at the moment? What a challenge it is to fill in the blank space underneath this simple question. What is my address? It has been almost two years and I literally don't have a settled address. Doesn't every person need an address to identify who they are? Who am I — an exile? No! I never want to be an exile, I just want to be away from my permanent address for a certain period of time. When our home becomes an unsafe place, we simply lose our address, says **Ma Thida**.

**W**hat is your address at the moment? What a challenge it is to fill in the blank space underneath this simple question. What is my address? It has been almost two years and I literally don't have a settled address. Doesn't every person need an address to identify who they are? Who am I — an exile? No! I never want to be an exile, I just want to be away from my permanent address for a certain period of time. When our home becomes an unsafe place, we simply lose our address.

So, how should I address myself? As homeless? As address-less? I never want to be country-less! I know my country is not a safe place but it is my country, my home, and my address. How can I easily give up addressing myself as a no-more- countryman of my own country? Yet, global society tries to identify me by my address. The idea of globalisation, paradoxically, has not helped with accepting the legitimacy of the global citizen. So, around the globe many writers who practice free speech are losing their chance to use their former identities or citizenship as a safe home, or settled address.

What a world we live in! Do you have to blur the background when you're having a zoom meeting with other writers? This seems to be a new technique to make people safe because identifying where we are is risky for many writers in my country, Myanmar. Though we do keep in touch and have activities or meetings on digital platforms, even though we live in different parts of the world. Some writers left for fighting fields inside the country, some are hidden in homes in small villages, some are in refugee

houses on the Thai–Myanmar border and some are living in modest housing in asylum countries. Some, courageously, remain at their own home addresses. But no one wants to disclose where they are right now, so we are careful to give no identifying clues — background colour, hanging objects on the wall, room layout, lighting of the space.

Any of those things can identify the place where the writer is. This cannot be allowed, or no one will feel safe. So we end up with blurred backgrounds in Zoom meetings. Just as the idea of a global citizen hasn't really taken off, the idea of the 'netizen' is not yet helpful for Myanmar writers either. Cyber security and data privacy for us is never guaranteed.

A nest of a dungeon? 'This is the fifth nest for me. In fact, this is like a self-imposed dungeon.' This is how a well-known writer who was charged under defamation law explains his 'new address'. Since April 2021, he has been on the list of writers and artists charged with defaming the military. Security forces reached his own home when he was away, so he too lost his address and went underground to avoid being arrested. He moved from one safe house to another, experiencing insecurity, rejection and bullying because he often had to share places with other people also hiding from the secret police and soldiers. Thankfully, he has still not been arrested, but lives in a small room of a house, never going into the living room or kitchen where neighbors might come and go.

He is there, but in secret, with no chance to live publicly. This man has moved five times already so calls this 'new address' (which is unknown to him too



because he was taken there late at night in a car's trunk) his fifth nest, or dungeon. His experience and living conditions reflect the current situation of an average revolutionary artist or activist in Myanmar. A Burmese writer forced to live outside her country, confronts her situation with questions that should have simple answers, but don't.

**Ma Thida: What is happening to writers in Myanmar now?**

On 1 February 2021, the day of the coup, four writers and poets were arrested and charged under defamation law, which carries two to three years imprisonment. All four of them (Maung Thar Cho, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, Than Myint Aung and Htin Lin Oo) have now been released. But since then, more than 40 writers and over 100 journalists have been arrested. Some were released after a couple of months, but currently more than 40 writers, poets and journalists remain in prison.

Two poets (K Z Win and Kyi Lin Aye) were killed during protests and one poet (Khet Thi) was killed during an investigation. Writer and activist Wai Moe Naing faces a potential prison term of almost 30 years on many serious charges, including high treason.

**What do you think might happen next, including for writers like you who are outside the country?**

We hold onto our freedom to create our own art, even though we writers have lost our addresses and face all kinds of risks. It is not easy, but we must use our freedom to choose not to be silent. Some of us might not be vocal or articulate for the time being, but we keep writing or creating because we foresee a day of light sooner or later. Then we need to be ready with our work to heal our society from deep-seated wounds and pain. We have witnessed the negative, terrible impact caused by irresponsible army men on our country's present and future. We know this is the dark time but we also know that there will still be a light.

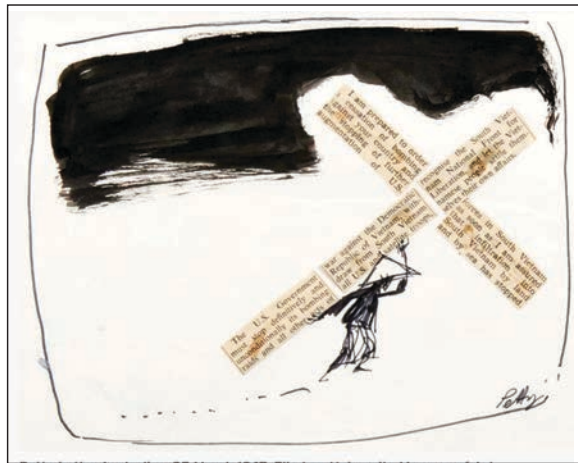
**Ma Thida is a Burmese surgeon, human rights activist and writer who has sometimes written under the pseudonym Suragamika. She was awarded the PEN/Barbara Goldsmith Freedom To Write award in 1996, in the course of her six years' imprisonment in Burma. Her most recent book in English translation is *Prisoner of Conscience*. She is currently chair of PEN's Writers in Prison Committee. This piece appeared in State Library's magazine, *Openbook*. Illustration of Ma Thida by Gianluca Costantini.**



# Petty's golden thread

The brilliant cartoonist illuminated Australia as it is, and as it could be, writes **Robert Phiddian**.

**T**he greatest and most influential Australian cartoonist of the postwar era, Bruce Petty, died just before Easter this year. Fifty-six years ago, just before Easter, he was working on an incendiary image:



**Petty in *The Australian*, 25 March 1967. Flinders University Museum of Art.**

In the cross made of newspaper, the words of the upright are Ho Chi Minh's and those of the crosspiece are Lyndon Johnson's. You can imagine the indigestion at the breakfast tables of a still very white Australia when politicians' words burdened a shockingly Vietnamese Christ on a modern *via dolorosa*. It isn't pretty or funny, but it is morally and intellectually arresting. It has historical and symbolic depth as well as contemporary bite.

If you are looking for ground zero of the idea that cartoonists are "of the left" in Australia, Petty's stint at *The Australian* in its first decade is it. He sided with the little guy, then asked how the system worked to keep him little and the usual suspects (captains of industry, financiers, the military industrial complex) big. His cartoons can be busy because he thinks in systems and mechanisms and wants to make them operate more fairly and generously.

Petty was always inclined to treat politicians

more as lackeys of vested interests and playthings of historical processes than as proper villains in their own right. This, I think, made him deeper than most other cartoonists or, indeed, most other satirists. I put no statute of limitations on this view. Juvenal looks like a grumpy whinger with a brilliant turn of phrase by comparison. Bill Leak could play the man superbly in his caricatures and punchlines, but the shafts of lightning didn't shed consistent light on Australia as it is, and as it could be.

Petty's cartoons did just that. The critique changed with the times, as the times demanded, but the golden thread of wanting a better, fairer, more intelligent and independent nation never disappeared into the fabric of daily affairs. On my first visit to interview him in the late nineties, he pointed me to a cupboard where there were "a few pictures of mine." It was less than a dozen — Petty visited the past often to learn lessons, but never to dwell there. He lived for tomorrow's paper, and the current art project.

He came a long way from a fruit farm in Doncaster as a child of the Depression, but he never lost the practical attitude to problems and sense of guiding purpose. Every cartoon asks something like "How do you fix this bloody thing, and get it to do what we want?" More or less sequentially, his satire had four great themes.

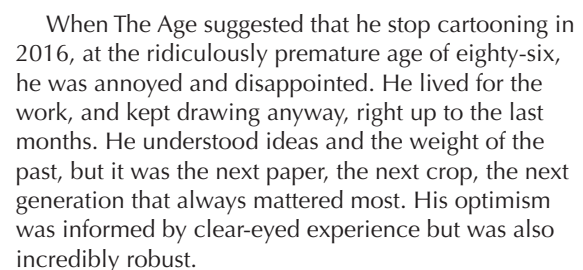
I have already illustrated the first — the horror and stupidity of war, particularly the Vietnam war. He had been to London and witnessed the collapse of Empire made explicit in decolonisation and the Suez Crisis of 1956. He returned to Australia via Southeast Asia in time to be cartooning during the death of Kennedy, the resignation of Menzies and, most importantly, the incremental decision to join the United States in Vietnam.

Rupert Murdoch's adventure in national influence, *The Australian*, was in its initial (wildly) progressive phase, and Petty was its standard-bearer. He was half a generation older than the baby boomers threatened with conscription and increasingly inclined to flood the street with moratoria. He also blew up the pomposity of Anzac Day in 1969 with a dismembered soldier's corpse from the actual war diverting a pious procession of "lest we forget."





Petty spent the second half of his life exploring his third and fourth themes, a long, intelligent dissent from this “Lucky Country” mentality and from the Reaganite confidence in market forces that came in its train. He never tired of showing how and why the economy should serve human needs and desires rather than its own geometry of indices. And he was farmer’s son enough to recognise that you have to protect long-term interests from human rapacity. Two cartoons, from 1977 and 2015 respectively, show that you can be right a long time as a satirist and not necessarily be attended to:



What would he say to the nation today? With his genius for being stern yet quizzical, I don't think he'd mind having this cartoon thrown back into the current debate over what it is to be a proper nation, one true to its past, present and future:

Though he is gone now, it wouldn't be a bad idea for us to look again into the satirical mirror he held up to us for so many decades. We might see something we could fix.



**Robert Phiddian** is Professor of English at Flinders University. With Richard Scully, Stephanie Brookes, and Lindsay Foyle, he is working on a history of Australian political cartoons. This story first appeared in *Inside Journal*: [insidestory.org.au/pettys-golden-thread/](http://insidestory.org.au/pettys-golden-thread/)



# Staring at the prison wall

Last year, **Dr Kylie Moore-Gilbert** delivered PEN's keynote address on the Day of the Imprisoned Writer at the NSW State Library on November 15. This is an extract from her acclaimed memoir, *The Uncaged Sky: My 804 days in an Iranian Prison*.

I stare at the wall inches in front of my face. Someone has scrawled something on it in ballpoint. The air-conditioning unit whirs noisily above my head and I shiver despite my layers of clothing. Over my shoulder, a man is making a speech in Farsi; there is aggression in his voice. He seems to be addressing me, although I have no idea what he is saying. I hear the muttering of other men, the creaking of chairs, heavy breathing. The man is shouting now, but the beat of my own heart is so loud that all his words are drowned out.

A sense of panic rises in my chest, and I put my hands over my ears. I focus on what has been written on the wall, try to read the Arabic script, searching for words I can understand. Maybe whoever wrote it had sat in the same chair as me, facing the same cold, dirty tiles, overcome by the same fear and confusion.

Someone else is talking now, and gradually the words seep through the fog in my brain. I realise they are in English: '... the security of our nation. If you do not cooperate, we will throw you into a dark hole where nobody will find you...'

I turn my head to the left, ever so slightly. 'Reza?'

'Yes,' he mutters, pausing mid-translation.

'Reza,' I stammer, 'I know you people can do anything you want to me here: you can rape me, you can torture me...' At this I start crying uncontrollably: loud, convulsive sobs.

Somebody barks something in Farsi from behind me, and Reza fires off a few rapid sentences in response. 'Kylie,' he says softly, 'nobody's going to do those things to you – don't worry.'

'But who are all these men?' I whisper. 'What do they want from me?'

The voice starts shouting again, and Reza resumes his translation. 'You will answer every single question we ask you, you will tell us everything you know. If you ever want to return to your country, you must cooperate. Nobody cares about you, nobody knows where you are. If we want, we can make you disappear...'

'Reza,' I whisper again, 'please. I need the toilet. Please, I think I'm going to throw up.'

After a brief exchange in Farsi, a woman appears at my side. She is clad in a black chador, the loose outer garment worn by religious Iranian women that cloaks them from head to toe. 'Cheshmband!' someone yells, as she motions for me to get out of my chair.

'Put your blindfold back on,' Reza says softly.

I obey, and the woman grasps my wrist and leads me from the room. I pull my own chador tightly around me, clasping it at the throat so that it stays on my head.

We make it to the bathroom, a squalid cubicle with a filthy squatter toilet and hose. 'T-toilet paper,' I stammer peering at the woman from under my blindfold. 'I need toilet paper.'

'No paper,' she says brusquely. 'Hurry.'

We return to the interrogation room where the man resumes his yelling.

'Tell us about the list of contacts you sent the university from Iran,' Reza translates.

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I cry. 'I never sent any contact list from Iran!'

Someone moves into my field of vision: I see a swarthy face, an unkempt beard, bushy eyebrows. It is one of the men from the hotel. The mean one. He smiles, revealing black gums and stained teeth, and holds up a printed page. It is an email I sent with a list of emergency contacts should I get into trouble. It includes my academic sponsor from a Tehran university, and the names of other academics involved in the university program I took part in. Elyas Hossein's name is there too.

'I didn't send that from Iran,' I exclaim. 'I sent it from Australia, before I left. Look at the date!'

Reza says something in Farsi, and the email is snatched away by a third person. The interrogator retreats without a word, and there is a discussion behind me. My tears start to flow once again. I try to focus on the writing on the wall, but the pounding in my ears begins to overwhelm my other senses. I need the bathroom again.

I stare at the wall of my cell, imagine that the patterns in the milky-coloured marble are faces,



**Photograph of Kylie Moore-Gilbert by Kristoffer Paulsen.**

or animals. I see mermaids, I see schools of fish and trees and pigeons. Someone has scratched 'EV 2018' in Latin script into a piece of metal which runs vertically down the corner of one wall.

For the millionth time I wonder who EV is, how long ago it was that she had been here. How long she spent in this windowless box. There are tally marks etched into this metal frame, and into the strip of soft plaster above the door. Twelve days, eight days, twenty-three days. There are names and dates in the Iranian calendar, in Arabic numerals. Some have been scrawled directly onto the marble tiles in blue pen.

My brain rages, taking in my meagre surroundings, searching over and over again for something new, for a piece of graffiti I haven't yet noticed, for a new stain on the carpet – anything.

I stare at the crumbling wall next to where I lie on the dusty ground. Someone had once painted it a beige colour, but now its paint is flaking, revealing pale concrete beneath. Yesterday I scratched a bird into its pockmarked surface, trying

to copy the shape of the parrots which roost in the plane trees outside my cell's boarded-up window. A guard had come out and yelled at me, motioning for me to stand up and pace around rather than lie on my back in the dust like I do in my cell. Perhaps she had a point, however, I prefer to look upwards. To keep my gaze fixed on the sky, and the birds wheeling freely away high above me.

I glance across at my drawing – and then look again. Next to my bird someone has scrawled in English: Stay strong. You're not alone.

My eyes dart over my shoulder, half-expecting to be caught in the act of reading this forbidden message. The faint hum of television emanates from the guards' room, the bubble lens of its omniscient camera sinister yet silent. I scratch around in the dirt for something sharp, and among the dried leaves and clumps of earth my fingers find a small rock.

Thank you, I etch into the wall's chalky veneer. I am Kylie from Australia.



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