

PEN South Africa newsletter / Issue 4 2016

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PEN South Africa has been watching the unfolding scene at our universities with rising alarm at the polarisation of debate around transformation and race and the accompanying violence and destruction. We have been distressed by the retreat of leadership and a devastating failure of imagination in addressing the very real problems about access to education.

The lack of foresight by those concerned with higher education – and here Minister Blade Nzimande must be held accountable – and others in government in not foreseeing the impact the much larger numbers of successful matriculants would have on university accommodation and other resources and on the ability of students to pay has been

disastrous. Accompanying these educational survival issues are other grave challenges about representation – political, literary and artistic – and language in our diverse and fractured society. Very deep class and racial antagonism has flared up on all of South Africa's campuses and they have revealed, brutally at times, the unresolved violences and exclusions of South Africa's past.

That we are at a point of crisis is clear. What we do with this crisis is crucial and will define the next decades of South Africa as the negotiated settlement that ushered in our constitutional democracy defined the last twenty years. Difficult as it might seem this is the moment in which South Africa can and must be rebuilt in the image of a future that has a place for everyone.

PEN stands for freedom of expression and the free transmission of ideas. To put it most simply this means a dialogue in which listening is as important as speaking. This is not the first time in history that people have found themselves at this pass in South Africa, in Africa and in the world. Repression has been one way in which protest has been dealt with – and that would be the worst possible outcome. There are other ways and we – as writers and as South Africans – are citizens of a hard-won constitutional democracy which has defined itself by being able to imagine a future based on inclusion and human rights. Our history left many scars.

Old wounds have been reopened with regard to the emotive questions of language to the unfinished business of nation-building, the flag, the compromises made in South Africa's transition to democracy, the dire state of the economy where the gulf between rich and poor, black and white has remained almost unchanged, and the fact that languages of power continue to be English and Afrikaans.

This is a time for questions. Here are just some of the questions that have been brought into sharp focus by the incendiary events on our campuses.

How do we ensure that languages other than English and Afrikaans are given power to stand on their own in trade and commerce and the sciences?

Should 'Business' promote the use of other languages thus taking our cue from PEN International's **Girona Manifesto** which sets out the right to mother tongue?

Should legislators contribute towards the creation of leveled playing fields with regard to language through real and sustained support of mother tongue education and reading?

Why aren't we seeing these problems in other parts of Africa?

What is the meaning to this mixed community we call South Africans of the country named after a geographic position?

Do we need to rethink the name of the country, choose a new anthem and forget the illusion of reconciliation and rainbow nationalism?

How do we deal with the troubled history of public art and representations of a brutal and exploitative history?

How will we imagine another future and how should it be scripted?

What image do we have of ourselves in this future?

What is next and how do we move forward after the venting of student anger has resulted in the burning of buildings, the petrol-bombing of a vice-chancellor's office and the closure of a university?

These are tough questions but they need to be answered, if we are to start addressing our issues as a people. A number of astute writers have addressed this crisis. These voices – from **Sisonke Msimang**, **Mike van Graan**, **Pierre de Vos**, **Panashe Chigumadzi**, **Lovelyn Chidinma Nwadeyi** and **Angelo Fick** – express a range of views. These responses and the many others that are being published are the foundations of this vital national conversation. Words are important, the tolerance of the expression of a diversity of views is as important.

Much of the fury expressed in the last weeks and months has legitimate origins because of the tenacity of discrimination and privilege and a failure of leadership to address these problems. Guns are not a solution, shooting at students is not a solution. Talking and writing and listening can be. It has been done in this country before and it needs to be done again.

Margie Orford
President, PEN South Africa

If you would like to write a response to the questions raised please contact us on communications@pensouthafrica.co.za.



Join Keorapetse Kgositsile, Chris Wanjala and Simona Škrabec for PEN's Free the Word! Event in Joburg

PEN International, PEN South Africa, and the University of the Witwatersrand are delighted to invite you to a free evening of readings, discussion, and debate in Johannesburg's celebrated jazz venue The Orbit in Johannesburg on Thursday 10 March at 7:30 PM. Please send RSVPs to Shireen.Rubenstein@wits.ac.za.

Poet Laureate, Professor Keorapetse Kgositsile (pictured), and Professor Chris Wanjala, literary critic, Kenya will be in conversation with Simona Škrabec, chair of PEN

International's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee...[read more](#)

**PEN Zimbabwe Revived and a Call for African Writers in the Diaspora**

The Zimbabwean PEN Centre has been revived with a new executive committee with Grace Mutandwa (pictured) as its chairperson...[read more](#)

The PEN Africa Network (PAN), which is meeting next week in Johannesburg, are forming an African Writers in the Diaspora PEN Centre. If you or someone you know is interested in joining please contact us on communications@pensouthafrica.co.za

**PEN Calls for an End to 27-year Threats Against Salman Rushdie**

"PEN has supported Rushdie since the fatwa was first passed and writers around the world stand in solidarity with him. It's highly disturbing to hear of this bounty offered by state-run media which should be rescinded immediately" - Jennifer Clement, President of PEN International...[read more](#)



Take Action on International Women's Day 2016

The 8th of March marks International Women's Day, observed each year to reflect on the progress made for women's rights, to call for change, and to honour those women who are agents of change at great personal risk and cost. This year PEN International will mark this day by campaigning on behalf [Mahvash Sabet](#), [Narges Mohammadi](#) and [Fatima Naoot](#) (pictured)...[read more](#)

UPCOMING EVENTS



Record Number of Entries for 2016 Caine Prize

This year the Caine Prize for African Writing received a record breaking number of entries: 166 short stories from writers representing 23 African countries...[read more](#)

NEW MEMBERS' TITLES

Take a look at what's happening in March...[read more](#)

CONGRATULATIONS!

Petina Gappah longlisted for the UK's Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award...[read more](#)

Anton Harber is the new editor-in-chief at eNCA...[read more](#)

SL Grey (Sarah Lotz and Louis Greenberg) have signed a US book deal for their latest novel, *The Apartment*...[read more](#)...And film rights for *The Apartment* have been bought by Steven Spielberg's production company, Amblin...[read more](#)

CORRECTION

In the last newsletter Mark Heywood's article "Literature and Identity: Who's Afraid of K Sello Duiker?" was incorrectly attributed to Mark Winkler.



Short Story Day Africa's latest anthology *Water: New Short Fiction from Africa*, edited by Nick Mulgrew and Karina Szczurek, is out and two of Abigail George's books are available for free download from Ovi Magazine...[read more](#)

CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

Ingrid Jonker Prize for Poetry...[read more](#)

Prairie Schooner Book Prize Contest...[read more](#)

IFLAC's Peace and Anti-Terror

Anthology...[read more](#)

Writer-in-Residence at The Kerouac
Project...[read more](#)

Thresholds International Short Fiction
Feature Writing Competition...[read more](#)

Gerald Kraak Award and Anthology is
now open for entries...[read more](#)

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Had a book published recently? Attended or participated in a festival? Won an award? Achieved a personal milestone of note? We welcome any news of your activities for future issues of the PEN SA newsletter.

Please email your contributions
to communications@pensouthafrica.co.za



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