

PEN South Africa newsletter / Issue 6 2016

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SOUTH AFRICA

Write!
Africa,
Write!

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Democracy and the Writer

By PEN SA member Heywood, based on a speech he delivered to the PEN Africa Network (PAN) meeting held in Johannesburg in March

This week the sentencing of 17 writers, academics, artists and activists by a court in Angola for the reading of a book shows once more the power of the word, the book and the writer. All were members of the Luanda Book Club. Writing, as we all know, is a very private process. But if writing is to be let loose on the world, the writer of conscience must become part of a public revolt.

Nearly 60 years ago American playwright Tennessee Williams staged an interview with himself for the *London Observer*. In response to his question about whether society was “succumbing to a deliberate mendacity” he stated:

“I’m inclined to think that most writers, and most other artists, too, are primarily motivated in their desperate vocation by a desire to find and to separate truth from the complex of lies and evasions they live in, and I think that this impulse is what makes their work not so much a profession as a vocation, a true ‘calling’.”

Tennessee Williams’ most famous plays weren’t overtly about the mendacity of politicians, but they were an avowed form of activism. They went against the stream and tried to draw attention to the flotsam in which society was swimming. Without them and the works of other writers of the 1940s and 1950s like Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller, our understanding of post-war America would be stuck to its surfaces. We would be unable to trace the roots of alienation, anger and the countercultures that would break to the surface in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the years since then, America and the world have changed vastly. The “negro” characters at the edges of plays such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* have moved closer to its centre. The lower middle classes have been forced out to the edges of society, where they have become fodder for Trumpism. But although the neoliberal period of politics and society might be unrecognisable to Williams and his peers, the importance Williams attached to the writer as a truth-seeker and truth-teller has not changed.

Truth-telling is also a feature of the writer that has been globalised.

Welcome to our South Africa! This afternoon I speak to you from the perspective of an activist for equality and social justice ... but one who also tries to write. My conviction is that every writer should be an activist and every activist a poet, someone who tries to use words to shape a new imaginary. Thank you for providing me an opportunity to reflect on an age-old theme, democracy and the writer, and to reassess its meaning in our modern worlds.

Today, our much put-upon Africa is once more going through agonies and contortions, many of which are again being imposed from outside. In this context the writer remains

vitaly important for understanding and articulating what is happening to our societies and peoples...[read more](#)

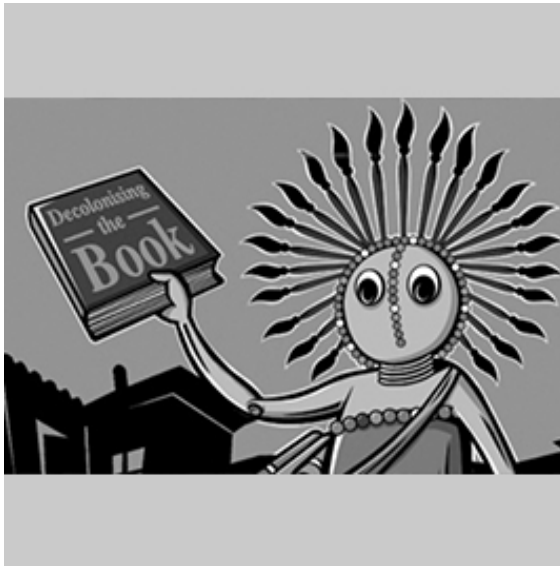
Read Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Letter and watch Keorapetse Kgositsile's Discussion and Reading from the PAN and TLRC Meetings

The PEN Africa Network meeting and the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee meeting were held in Johannesburg in March.

PEN International organised a Free the Word event at The Orbit with South African Poet Laureate and PEN SA member Keorapetse Kgositsile speaking to Simona Škrabec, chair of PEN International's Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee. Watch the discussion and his readings [here](#) and [here](#).

Kenyan Writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o sent a letter expressing his solidarity with the Translation and Linguistic Rights Committee: *"I am glad to see PEN taking a lead in the promotion of Literature in African language. I like the phraseology, African languages, rather than local languages because the local may have the implication that there are languages which are inherently global. The Universal declaration of linguistic rights assumes equality of the reality and potentiality of all languages no matter the size of the population that uses them. "* ...[read more](#)

Jalada Africa recently launched their Translation issue, in which they translated wa Thiong'o's story "Ituĩka Rĩa Mūrūngarū: Kana Kĩrĩa Gītūmaga Andũ Mathĩr Marūngĩr", into over 30 African languages...[read more](#)



Decolonising the Book at the Time of the Writer Festival

The theme for this year's Time of the Writer Festival, co-curated by PEN SA member Thando Mqolozana, was Decolonising the Book. We've rounded up some of the articles on the event...[read more](#)



Pernicious Pursuit of the Luanda Book Club

PEN is concerned at news that 17 Angolan activists, known as the Luanda Book Club, were sentenced to between 2-8 years in prison and fined 50,000 kwanza (around 300 USD) on Monday, 28 March 2016, for 'preparatory acts of rebellion' and 'criminal conspiracy'. An earlier charge of 'attempting against the president's life' was dropped by the prosecution on 21 March 2016...[read more](#)



UN Human Rights Committee Reviews South Africa

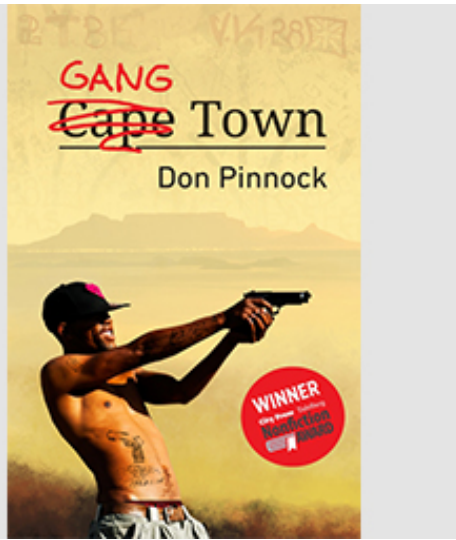
The UN Human Rights Committee have released their concluding observations on South Africa's human-rights record following a review session held in Switzerland in early March. South Africa is being reviewed as it is one of the states that has ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)...[read more](#)

NEW MEMBERS' TITLES



Kenyan Cartoonist Dismissed from Paper Must be Reinstated or Compensated

News that Kenyan cartoonist Godfrey Mwampembwa (known as Gado) has been dismissed from the Nation Media Group's Daily Nation, allegedly due to political pressure, is deeply concerning, PEN International, PEN Kenya, PEN South Africa, South African satirical cartoonist Zapiro and the South African newspaper the Mail & Guardian said today. The group called for him to be reinstated or compensated...[read more](#)



New titles from PEN SA members include [Gang Town](#) by Don Pinnock, [Affluenza](#) by Niq Mhlongo, [Bearings](#) by Isobel Dixon and [Bumper Cars](#) by Athol Williams. Recent titles from new PEN SA members include [Letters of Stone](#) by Steven Robins, [Academic Freedom in a Democratic South Africa](#) by John Higgins, [The Attribute Of Poetry](#) by Elisa Galgut and [Stranger](#) by Sihle Ntuli...[read more](#)

CONGRATULATIONS!

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

UPCOMING EVENTS

Take a look at the PEN SA members' book launches and readings happening in April. The *New Contrast* Literary Journal, edited by PEN SA member Meg Vandermerwe, will be launched on 6 April at The Book Lounge in Cape Town and subscriptions will be available on the night...[read more](#)

CALLS FOR SUBMISSIONS

City Press Tafelberg Nonfiction Award...[read more](#)

South African Literary Awards 2016...[read more](#)

The Babishai 2016 Babishaiku and Poetry Awards...[read more](#)

Rhyme On Poetry Writing Contest...[read more](#)

Pen Factor Writing Competition...[read more](#)

Masande Ntshanga participated in the Caine Prize Workshop...[read more](#)

Imraan Coovadia won Best Single Authored Fiction for *Tales of the Metric System* and Joanne Hichens won Best Edited Fiction Volume for *Adults Only* at the NIHSS Book, Creative and Digital Awards...[read more](#)

Andrew Salomon and Mark Winkler have been shortlisted for the 2016 Commonwealth Short Story Prize...[read more](#)

WELCOME!

Welcome to new Professional members Sihle Ntuli, Steven Robins, John Higgins, Elisa Galgut and Amy Heydenrych.

[Send us your news](#)

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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