Our activities and impact

1 APRIL 2021 – 31 MARCH 2022

L-R: Adjoa Andoh, Burhan Sönmez, Elif Shafak, Philippe Sands
Southbank Centre

Credit: George Torode
About English PEN

Founded in 1921, English PEN is one of the world’s oldest human rights organisations, championing the freedom to write and the freedom to read. We are the founding centre of PEN International, a worldwide writers' association with 147 centres in more than 100 countries. With the support of our members – a community of writers, readers, and activists – we protect freedom of expression whenever it is under attack. We campaign for writers facing persecution around the world and offer respite residencies to international writers. We celebrate contemporary international writing through our online magazine, PEN Transmissions, and we award literary grants for translating new works into English. We bring together outstanding writers, readers and translators for unforgettable conversations and we celebrate courageous writing with three annual literary prizes – the PEN Pinter Prize, the PEN Ackerley Prize and the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize.
‘English PEN marked its centenary in 2021/22. The first meeting of the PEN movement took place in London in October 1921, and the idea quickly spread to multiple countries across the world. This is a remarkable achievement for any organisation and feels particularly remarkable for an organisation like English PEN, one which is at its heart a collective of readers, writers and activists who work to further conversations around human rights and freedom of expression, and the importance, role, purpose, and potential of literature in this work. It was my immense honour to take up the role of Chair of the Board of Trustees at the English PEN Annual General Meeting in December 2021, and I look forward to supporting the important work of this charity.’

Ruth Borthwick, Chair of English PEN
Supporting writers at risk

Founded in 1960, English PEN’s Writers at Risk Programme is one of the world’s longest running campaigns for freedom of expression. We campaign on behalf of writers who are persecuted, harassed, imprisoned, and even murdered in violation of their right to freedom of expression. Working closely with PEN International, sister PEN centres, and other like-minded organisations, we strive to raise awareness and to provide concrete support to at-risk colleagues – from sending appeal letters to the relevant authorities to writing messages of solidarity and staging fundraisers, vigils, and events.

In 2021/22, English PEN and our community of members have:

- Issued public statements on a range of cases of concern, including Elchin Mammad (Azerbaijan), Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace (Bahrain), Roman Protasevich (Belarus), the closure of our sister centre PEN Belarus, Alaa Abd El-Fattah (Egypt), Patricia Devlin (Northern Ireland), Julian Assange (UK/US), and many more.

- Featured pieces on our online magazine, *PEN Transmissions* by Yirgalem Fisseha Mebrahtu, Selahattin Demirtaş, and Nedim Türfent’s response to a message of solidarity from Ai Weiwei.

- Led on a letter to the Home Secretary calling on the UK government to open the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS); joined PEN International and sister centres in calling for the immediate release of Australian writer Yang Hengjun; supported an urgent letter concerning Iranian writer Baktash Abtin, a PEN America honoree; supported an open letter marking one year since poet Innocent Bahati was disappeared in Rwanda; coordinated solidarity activities for writers and journalists in Turkey; joined sister PEN centres in calling for a peaceful solution and supported a letter signed by over 1000 writers condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; coordinated a statement from sister PEN centres condemning the UK’s decision to allow the extradition of Julian Assange.

- As our residency programme remained on hold due to the pandemic and related travel restrictions, we continued to use reallocated residency funds to provide emergency support to journalists at risk. We have also continued to receive support from colleagues at the Prisoners of Conscience Appeal Fund. During this period, we provided grants to writers from Azerbaijan, Egypt, Myanmar, Nicaragua, and Syria.

- Developed a new partnership with the London Library supporting writers in times of displacement in the UK through membership to the library.
When we are hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder, neither iron fists nor Thor's hammer can button our lips.

- Nedim Türfent, Turkey
English PEN Centenary

Common Currency

2021 was an immensely significant year, marking the centenary of English PEN, and we undertook one of the most ambitious events and public programmes in the organisation’s history. This major programme of events, residencies and commissions was titled ‘Common Currency’ and was held in partnership with arts organisations across England including Nottingham UNESCO City of Literature, Off the Shelf, Southbank Centre, Bristol Festival of Ideas, METAL, New Writing North, Ripples of Hope Festival Salford, London Library, Institut Français, Hay Festival and Cúirt International Festival of Literature, among others. Common Currency was supported by a National Lottery Project Grant from Arts Council England, British Council, Cockayne Grants for the Arts – a donor advised fund of London Community Foundation, and PEN International.

PENWrites

In 2021/22, we extended our international letter-writing campaign to additional cases of concern, including imprisoned Egyptian poet and lyricist Galal El-Behairy, imprisoned blogger and academic Dr Abduljalil Al-Singace, currently on hunger strike in Bahrain, Writers in Myanmar imprisoned or otherwise at risk following the military coup, and Ugandan writer Kakwenza Rukirabashaija, the winner of the 2021 PEN Pinter Prize for an International Writer of Courage.

We also continued to encourage supporters to send letters to other featured writers and their families – Amanuel Asrat (Eritrea), Nedim Türfent (Turkey), PEN Belarus, and Pham Doan Trang (Vietnam). We highlighted the campaign and our featured cases at public events and online. This included at the Ripples of Hope Festival in Manchester, throughout English PEN 100 events at the Southbank Centre and through Ai Weiwei’s artwork for Common Currency.
PENWrites has led to over 1000 messages of solidarity being sent to recipients from over 30 countries. Undoubtedly, the impact of the campaign continues to be best expressed by the recipients, for example this message from Amanuel Asrat’s brother Robel:

I hope this year will be the year we see Amanuel and he will see how the world loves him. To everyone who constantly sends us a solidarity message, we are very thankful for [your] messages and comfort.
We campaign to defend the right to freedom of expression and the promotion of literature in the UK.

In 2021/22, English PEN and our members have submitted responses to the following consultations:

- **Legislation to Counter State Threats** (hostile state activity)
  - Home Office
- **Defamation Reform**
  - Finance Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly
- **Human Rights Act Reform: A Modern Bill of Rights**
  - Ministry of Justice
- **In-person consultations on the Online Safety Bill** (hosted by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport) and on **anti-SLAPP** (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) **measures** (hosted by the Ministry of Justice)

English PEN prepared the following briefings and letters for MPs and Lords:

- **Briefing on the Implications of the Higher Education Bill on Free Speech; Open letter on the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC); Letter to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee (PACAC)**
- **We also gave oral evidence in relation to the following:**
  - Northern Ireland Defamation Reform; Lawfare and Free Speech
    - Evidence to Communications and Digital Committee
- **English PEN organised the following roundtables in 2021/22:**
  - Roundtable on the Higher Education Bill; Legal
    Roundtables on Anti-SLAPP Solutions

English PEN welcomed the judgement of the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights in May 2021 which found that the UK government’s programmes of mass surveillance of electronic communications as disclosed by Edward Snowden were unlawful. This case was brought forth by English PEN, Big Brother Watch, Open Rights Group, Dr Constance Kurz and others.
Supporting literary translation

We champion literature beyond national and linguistic borders, and beyond conventional literary expectations. Our mission reflects the PEN Charter’s declaration that ‘literature knows no frontiers and must remain common currency among people in spite of political or international upheavals.’ We do this through our PEN Translates grant, online publishing, events programming, and advocacy.

In 2021/22, English PEN and our members have:

- Awarded 30 PEN Translates grants to books from 25 publishers, 21 countries and 21 languages.
- Given awards for the first time to titles from Yemen, Ecuador, Ireland, Djibouti, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and books translated from Tibetan, Irish, Mè’phàà and the Char-Chaporî dialect of Assamese and Bengali.
- Supported the first novels by Tibetan and Yemeni women ever to be published in the UK, the first collection of Miyah poetry in translation, and the first children’s book in Hungarian to feature LGBTQ+ protagonists.
- Brought together 25 speakers for the day-long, online 12th International Translation Day (ITD) on 30 September, which was attended by 180 audience members, including translators from 30 countries working between 43 languages. Panels explored translation and racial justice, multilingual translation, sensitivities related to children’s literature in translation, and current marketing practices for translated literature; three workshops; a live- pitching session; the announcement of the National Centre for Writing’s Emerging Translation Mentorship Scheme mentees; and a headline conversation with writer and translator Scholastique Mukasonga and Melanie Mauthner. The programme was generously supported by ALCS, the Booker Prize Foundation and the National Centre for Writing.
- Across 2021/22, we conducted a large-scale research and development project in collaboration with Translating Women, supported by the University of Exeter, consulting with translators, scouts, agents, publishers, and organisers to explore the pressing needs for the translated literature sector. From this research, we have developed PEN Presents, a new programme to showcase and support sample translations, which aims to fund the often-unpaid work of creating samples, give publishers access to titles from underrepresented languages and regions, and help diversity the translated literature landscape.
Nedim Türfent responded to Ai Weiwei’s message of solidarity: ‘Come back home peacefully’ in PEN Transmissions.
PEN Transmissions is English PEN’s online magazine for international and translated voices. It is a digital home for some of the best writers from around the world, writing about the most urgent and important issues of our time. *PEN Transmissions* has become a key platform during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was quickly recognised that demand for online publishing would rise, and that *PEN Transmissions* could be harnessed as a space to platform conversations planned as part of English PEN’s events programme and campaigns.

In 2021/22 *PEN Transmissions* has:

- Commissioned essays and interviews by 64 writers and translators in 26 countries, including Françoise Vergès, Tim Burrows, Tice Cin, Nadine Anne Hura (Ngāti Hine, Ngāpuhi), Panashe Chigumadzi, Andrew Lownie, Samar Yazbek, Worapoj Panpong, Suhaiymah Manzoor Khan, Anuradha Roy, and Daniela Hodrová.
- Welcomed over 34,000 readers in 165 countries.
- Collaborated with Shadow Heroes, the International Booker Prize, Essex Writers House and Metal, the Believer, and Cúirt International Festival of Literature.
- Published a month-long focus on indigenous Pasifika writers.
‘I think that my poetry is inherently political because of the world that I live in. I don’t think any poet can detach their identity from their poetry. Poets of colour don’t receive whiteness as an identity, yet we live in a world in which that’s the normative voice. Even if I wrote love poems, they would be political, because the context in which I’m loving is inherently political. I would say, actually, that lots of my poems are love poems, because they stem from love. I think there’s a perception that writers of colour go out of their way to think or write about topics like racism. In reality, we write from feeling, and I think oftentimes love is one of the strongest feelings we write from, whether that’s a love for other people, a love for the community, even a love of ourselves, or hope that we could love ourselves. And I think all those loves are bound up with other political questions; you’re already being quite subversive in a world system that thinks you don’t hold value.’

Suhaïymah Manzoor Khan

‘Something Different Altogether: A Conversation’ PEN Transmissions
Events

We bring outstanding writers and translators together for unforgettable conversations. Our events programme focuses on platforming international voices and UK writers to speak to the key areas of our work.

In 2021/22, our events programme and public art commissions continued both online and in person, reaching audiences of over 80,000.

The English PEN Literary Salon at London Book Fair took place online in June 2021 and featured writers including Lucy Caldwell, Sarah Clarke, Selma Dabbagh, Josie George, Mark Gevisser, Daniel Gorman, Florian Grosset, Lisa IuXx, Paul Mason, Daniela Petracco, Eimear Ryan, Philippe Sands, Dr Alice Tarbuck, Ece Temelkuran and Tamara Zimet.

Common Currency included a large number of literary events related to English PEN’s mission. 22 writing commissions, engagement projects for young people, writing residencies with established and emerging writers, a festival of literature and free expression at the Southbank Centre, a number of BBC World Service radio features and a new digital, projected artwork from artist Ai Weiwei, featuring quotes on freedom of expression from a wide variety of voices. We collaborated with writers and artists across the country including Maria Ressa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Salman Rushdie, Adania Shibli, Nayrouz Qarmout, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Samar Yazbek, Lydia Cacho Ribeiro, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Kit De Waal, Suad Aldarra, So Mayer and many others. The 2021 PEN HG Wells lecture was delivered by Elif Shafak as part of the Ripples of Hope Festival in Manchester. This centenary programme, delivered under the challenging conditions of the pandemic, was a huge success that engaged a range of arts organisations across the UK, from major cultural centres to small, locally based arts organisations.
Prizes

Each year, we present three awards to outstanding writers – the PEN Pinter Prize, the PEN Hessell-Tilman Prize, and the PEN Ackerley Prize. These prizes recognise excellence in historical nonfiction, literary autobiography, and a courageous and unflinching approach to the written word.

In 2021/2022, English PEN and our members have celebrated:

- Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga winning the 2021 PEN Pinter Prize at an in-person and online event in October 2021, in collaboration the British Library. She named Ugandan writer Kakwenza Rukirabashaija as the International Writer of Courage.

- Claire Wilcox winning the 2021 PEN Ackerley Prize for her memoir Patch Work: A Life Amongst Clothes (Bloomsbury).

- Rebecca Wragg Sykes winning the 2021 PEN Hessell-Tilman Prize for Kindred: Neanderthal Life, Love, Death (Bloomsbury)

The PEN Pinter Prize is supported by the generosity of the Blavatnik Family Foundation and Ruth Maxted.

‘My career has taught me that the work of a writer is doing and that when circumstances allow, this doing is in fact writing. On the other hand, when circumstances do not allow for the writing process, a writer continues the expression that is no longer possible in literature, or that has become inadequate through literature with other actions. I have come to see that the work of writing is not to be seen to be doing but, in fact, to do and to keep on doing, regardless of circumstances. Only sometimes, if a writer is very fortunate, is that doing seen.’

Tsitsi Dangarembga, 2021 PEN Pinter Prize
Our members

Membership of English PEN as of 31 March 2022 was 1073. We welcomed one new Honorary Member – Hanna Komar – and developed a partnership with The London Library which saw two English PEN Honorary Members become London Library Members.

Efforts were made to enhance the membership experience for supporters of English PEN, particularly during the pandemic. Continuing our regular members’ Zoom calls, we programmed conversations with Cathy Rentzenbrink, Kate Macdonald and Faye Hammill on the republication of former PEN member Margaret Kennedy’s 1950 novel, The Feast.
Become a member

English PEN membership is open to everyone – join our vibrant community of writers, readers and activists today.

As a member of English PEN, you’ll be helping to support our varied and vital work to champion the freedom to write and the freedom to read around the world.

Sign up at englishpen.org/membership

‘No organisation in the world knows better than PEN the vital importance of protecting the rights of individuals and of groups

No group of individuals knows better than the members of PEN around the world about the power of the word, its ability to offer a protective embrace, for the writer, for the reader, for others.’

Philippe Sands, President of English PEN
Our partners and funders

Operating at the intersection between arts and human rights, collaboration is central to every piece of work that English PEN undertakes. We are hugely thankful to our members, our core funders, our project partners, and our Silver PEN partners, whose support is vital for sustaining English PEN’s mission to promote the freedom to write and the freedom to read in the UK and around the world.

Our Core Funders

Supported using public funding by

ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

T. S. ELIOT FOUNDATION
Our Silver PEN Partners 2021/22

David Higham Associates  
Canongate  
Penguin Random House  
HarperCollins  
London Book Fair  
The London Library  
Amazon UK  
Pushkin Press

Our Project Partners 2021/22

From venues and festivals to publishers and philanthropists, we’re proud to have worked with a wide range of partners on delivering our programmes and projects. Recent partners include:

Article 19  
Arts Council England  
Authors’ Licensing and Collecting Society  
Bates Wells  
Blavatnik Family Foundation  
Bloomberg Philanthropies  
Booker Foundation  
Bristol Cultural Development Partnership  
British Library  
British Museum  
Brixton Review of Books  
Cockayne Grants for the Arts – a donor advised fund of London Community Foundation  
Fondation Jan Michalski  
Hay Festival  
Metal  
National Centre for Writing  
New Writing North  
Nottingham, UNESCO City of Literature  
Off The Shelf, Festival of Words  
Open Society Foundations  
PEN International  
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RSF  
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Southbank Centre